

Engaging Employers in Curriculum Development through Collaboration

*A Case Study of an Executive MBA
Programme*

Yinping Ma



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Faculty of Education

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Engaging Employers in Curriculum Development through Collaboration: A Case Study of an Executive MBA Programme

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Yinping Ma

<http://www.duo.uio.no/>

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IV

Abstract

The study explores how higher education institutions may engage employers effectively in curriculum development within the context of collaboration. By way of a case study into an Executive MBA programme at BI Norwegian School of Management, it seeks to investigate how HEI and employers can collaborate effectively in curriculum development. The study draws on documentation analysis and semi-structured interviews of central participants involved in the curriculum development. The case study explores the main processes and relationships underpinning the collaborative curriculum development in order to identify the drivers and situations likely to influence the HEI-employer collaboration in curriculum development. More specifically, the study identifies some challenges and pragmatic issues that arise for HEI in managing the collaborative initiative and focuses on the engagement activities of HEI that may contribute to effective collaboration. By doing so, it allows understanding how such collaboration/partnership can be managed effectively for improved curriculum planning and delivery. The study also shows how the initial experience of this Executive MBA curriculum development may inform the effective collaboration.

The main findings of this study can be summarised as follows: Firstly, such HEI-employer collaboration needs to be led by academics in order to integrate meaningful employer input and balance the different expectations of different stakeholders; Secondly, further employer involvement in work-related assessment or other support for student learning is not easily achieved and needs careful nurturing; Thirdly, maintaining positive dynamics between academics and employers and sustaining continued engagement from both partners are crucial to the successful curriculum development results. Certain factors that may contribute to this are identified, such as the establishment and use of an Advisory board. However, there is no one right way to handle the complexity of employer engagement, and each programme will need to find its way of working.

More research is needed to understand how meaningful employer input can be integrated at individual programmes; how employers can be involved in work-related assessment or other activities in supporting student learning; and how both partners can be effectively engaged.

Key words: curriculum development, HEI-employer collaboration, employer engagement

Preface

This master thesis concludes my studies in the European Masters Degree in Higher Education.

First of all, I would like to thank the professors and administrators of the HEEM programme for all their work of sharing knowledge and providing support throughout all my studies.

Specially, I want to express my gratitude to my supervisor, Monika Nerland, for her advice, support, patience and encouragement. She has helped me a lot through the difficult parts of this thesis and significantly contributed to the improvement of it.

To the directors, professors and senior advisor of the MBA programmes at BI Norwegian School of Management, who kindly agreed to participate in the present case study and provided me with lots of practical information of the programme.

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Finally, I would like to direct my warmest thanks to my parents and my friend Wu Hao for always supporting me in every way they possibly could.

Abbreviations

BI	BI Norwegian School of Management
EMBA	Executive Master of Business Administration
FD	Foundation degree
HE	Higher education
HEI	Higher education institution
NBS	Nanyang Business School
SOF	Shipping, offshore and finance
WRA	Work-related assessment

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background

Over the past decade higher education has been described as a driver of economic competition in the knowledge-based economy. The imperative for higher education is to raise higher skills of graduates and professionals, to sustain an internationally competitive research and to improve knowledge dissemination to the benefits of the industry or society more generally. However, it has been criticised that education does not have much relevance to the real world and that knowledge production carried out is in the absence of some practical goal. This reality has therefore contributed to recognising and promoting a closer relationship between higher education and world of work/industry, i.e. collaborative research for innovation and new technology. This shift towards HE-industry collaboration may deeply affect research, teaching, pedagogy, funding and other important areas of academic world.

One important element of change that will play a dominant part is the vocationalism of higher education. There is a growing trend to integrate the needs of employers and workplace in higher education curriculum. This relationship is the coming together of the student learning experience with the world of work, which was once part of the hidden curriculum but now it is becoming part of the “explicit curriculum” (Foskett, 2005, p. 253). In UK, for example, English policymakers urge that the education system must respond flexibly to the needs of employers and individuals, so that it becomes effectively “demand-driven”, with employers afforded a key role in what is supposed to be an ‘employer-led’ system (DfES et al. 2003; Leitch, 2006). In policy terms, discussions have been around developing a “partnership” between the state, employers and individuals, with all expected to “play their part” in up-skilling the nation (Brown, et al., 2004, p.45). In consequence, there has been seen a move to encourage higher education institutions (HEIs) to develop appropriate curricula in line with government priorities, and to do this by delivering Foundation Degrees through collaboration with employer partners and further education (FE) institutions. Similarly in Norway, the development of links with business can be tracked back some way in key government policies. Norwegian policymakers look to restructuring curriculum that aims to produce the ‘skilled’ and ‘adaptable’ workforce for economic competitiveness. The ‘Reform 94’, which has

adopted vocationalism with 16-19 curriculum, was characterised by the extensive involvement and influence of the 'social partners' in both its preparation and implementation. Embedding the aims and values of this reform, the 'Core Curriculum' stressed the importance of developing key competencies and modular-based subject curricula, including apprenticeship training in enterprises (Payne, 2002). This reform taking place in the upper level of secondary school was signalled as an area for development in higher education. Berg (1992) described a 'professionalisation' process occurring in Norwegian higher education, where universities became more vocationally oriented both at an institutional and curricular level. Higher education institutions (HEIs) established more contacts with outside and began turning to labour market for advice in designing and changing curricula.

At operational level, such extrinsic pressures initiated the efforts by many HEIs for the effectiveness and responsiveness to some perceived needs of employers. Some of the institutions have actively taken the strategies of working with the world of work in serving teaching and other development activities at regional and local level. It was within this context there is an increasing need for an integrated and responsive curriculum reflecting the trends in business and preparing professionals to function in a context closely related to the world of work. This commitment has been seen in many institution-level initiatives and departmental-level curriculum concerns, aiming at relating their curriculum to the needs of business across a set of courses offered. The initiative may focus on how universities will need to redesign their organisational structures and management priorities to foster such links and provide a favourable setting in which collaborative arrangement can flourish (Kezar, 2004). The emergence of foundation degrees is a response to employer needs through curriculum planning with employers, with a number of unique features such as: employer involvement in relation to design, review and demand; the development of vocational skills and knowledge; application of skills in the workplace, through work experience; accessibility through delivery mode, learning, teaching and assessment strategies, etc. Specifically, the potential for relationship or collaboration between HE and employers has been advocated in the field of work-based learning which is characterised a curriculum derived from work place; and a learning process that incorporates real work activities and draws knowledge gained through work.

These collaborative programmes, either foundation degrees or work-based learning programmes, developed with participation of employers and sometimes involving them in

close collaboration, have a significant impact on the academic rationale, curriculum modes and learning experiences. These collaborative programmes also vary in the scope and degree of employer involvement. For instance, programmes engage employers in offering students short-term placements, projects, or internships, etc. Different from these small-scale HEI-employer collaborations in delivering work-based learning programmes, the present study is trying to take a further step by investigating collaboration around both the curriculum design and delivery. This collaborative effort requires a significant change in the way HEIs design curriculum as well as practical experiences.

The study explores how higher education institutions may engage employers effectively in curriculum development within the context of collaboration. By way of a case study into an EMBA programme at BI Norwegian School of Management, it seeks to investigate how HEI and employers can collaborate effectively in curriculum development. The study draws on documentation analysis and semi-structured interviews of central participants involved in the curriculum development. The case study explores the main processes and relationships underpinning the collaborative curriculum development in order to identify the drivers and situations likely to influence the HEI-employer collaboration in curriculum development. More specifically, the study identifies some challenges and pragmatic issues that arise for HEI in managing the collaborative initiative and focuses on the engagement activities of HEI that may contribute to effective collaboration. By doing so, it allows understanding how such collaboration/partnership can be managed effectively for improved curriculum planning and delivery. The study also shows how the initial experience of this MBA curriculum development may inform the effective collaboration in curriculum development.

1.2 Research Rationale and Questions

The world of work has been a strong influence on the design of the curriculum (Barnett, et al., 2001). It is believed that world of work, as extrinsic influences on higher education, imposes content, methods or structures that will “improve” education. For instance, the development of competencies, especially professional expertise, requires integration of different types of knowledge and interaction between theory and practice. Close collaboration and partnership between HE and workplace is essential to realise this pedagogical principle. In many cases of collaborative programmes, the students and staff work closely with employers through the curriculum in their work-based learning modules and in the professional development

assignments (Foskett, 2003). The sources of employers' input, along with educators' own expertise and analytical assessment, is believed to contribute to the goals of:

- (1) The creation of a well-rounded student with broad-based professional and academic skills; and
- (2) The preparation of students to function effectively in their chosen occupations (McCuddy, et al., 2008, p. 612).

Although the development of curricula for this purpose is often suggested as an area for cooperation between HEIs and world of work, evidence of the innovative practices has not yet informed certain ambiguities surrounding such joint initiatives. Such approaches can pose challenges to the structure, system and culture within HEIs. Specifically, the workforce markets, whether individual employee or employer, require new models of teaching and learning (Wedgwood, 2006, p.5): the responsiveness and integration; the content of courses; the way they are delivered and assessed; the student support system; the involvement of the employer and company; the administration; and the marketing, etc. These themes remain a complex and problematic area without clear or obvious solutions.

This thesis thus proposes that there is a sound rationale for investigating the ongoing HEI-employer collaboration discourse through curriculum at a practical level. The research problem, accordingly, is defined as:

How can HEI and employers collaborate effectively in curriculum development?

To research this issue, the following three core aspects will be further explored based on a case study:

- 1) How is the work with employers in developing and delivering a curriculum carried out in the case study?
- 2) What are the challenges and pragmatic issues that arise for the HEI in managing the collaboration, in particular, engaging employers in the development process?
- 3) How can such HEI-employer collaboration in curriculum development be made to work effectively?

The first two questions will be investigated empirically based on a case study, while the third question will be discussed in relation to the experience of other similar development

initiatives in previous studies, aiming to find out what advice can be given for effective collaboration. The theoretical perspective and core concepts concerned in this study, as well as the methodology, will be discussed later in Chapter 2 and 3.

The research provides information about the new phenomenon of HEI-employer collaboration in developing a curriculum to support workforce development. In practical sense, the experience of involving employers in the case study would inform future developments across other programmes both within the HEI of the present study and beyond, particularly useful to other academic departments that seek to appropriately tie their curricula to industry needs. The findings generated from the study would also enable HEI to tailor their approaches to engaging employers for having a more likely successful partnership.

1.3 Thesis Outline

The study refers to collaboration in curriculum development a process, therefore the analysis of this research will follow the HEI-employer collaboration development process, specifically through distinctive phases from collaboration building to more complex implementation/curriculum development, maintaining, deepening and development of it.

Chapter 1 is the introduction chapter that presents the research problem and questions by briefly introducing the study background to, and rationale for the study.

Chapter 2 summarises prior research and evaluates the main research findings relevant to the research topic. The literature review makes explicit some key concepts and presents a number of related studies regarding the issues of curriculum development through HEI-employer collaboration. The research topic in the present case study is examined under a framework for exploring the content and process of the curriculum development.

Chapter 3 provides a description of the methodology that has been used in designing and implementing the research.

Chapter 4 presents a reflective case and looks into the process for collaborating with employers in curriculum planning and delivery. It also sheds light on pragmatic issues and challenges that arise for HEI when managing the collaboration.

Chapter 4 attempts to relate the experience of the present case to previous studies and provide insights into good practice that would contribute to effective HEI-employer collaboration, and lead to improved curriculum planning and delivery as a result.

Chapter 5 concludes the findings and limitations of the study and suggests the future research areas and topics.

2 Literature Review and Analytical Framework

In this chapter, the understanding of definitions of collaboration or employer engagement, relevant literature regarding collaborative curriculum development will be discussed as well as the framework used for the analysis of this thesis will be presented.

2.1 A Perspective on Collaboration, Employer Engagement, and Curriculum Development

In a recent report, Connor and Hirsh (2008) conclude that employer influence on higher education mainly comes *through active collaboration* – and this is the concern of this thesis – a higher education institution locates such cooperative relationship as the design and delivery of its own management programme. The notion of collaboration/partnership between education provider and employers needs to be clarified first. “Collaboration” involves cooperation sharing “the ultimate commitment between two organisations because they involve sharing risks, responsibilities, resources and rewards” (Polenske, 2004, p.1029), but it is usually less formal than a binding, legal contract and responsibilities may not shared equally; while “partnership” is a contractual relationship involving close cooperation two or more parties having specified and joint rights and responsibilities. These tend to be based on institutional structures (Cooper et al., 2008, p.37). The current HEI-employer cooperation in the present research is “a relationship involving close cooperation and joint rights and responsibilities between employers and a higher education institution that produces mutually beneficial outcomes (Walker, 2009, p.12)”, but in general it is based on more informal relationships rather than a formal and fully “partnership” according to the intensity of cooperation and scale of intervention, so the notion of “collaboration” has been used to define their relationship in the present research.

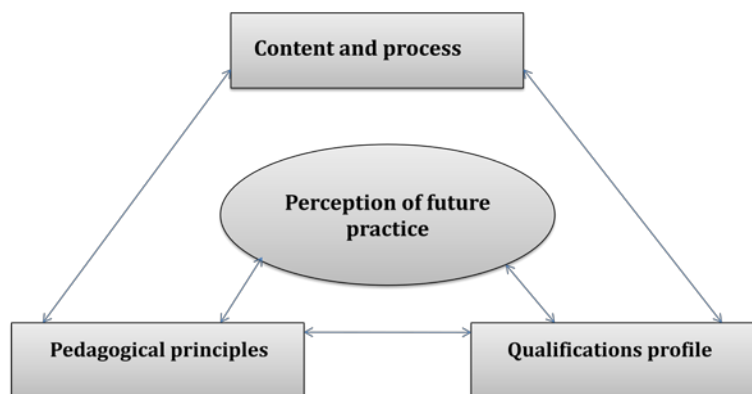
Employer engagement is the central theme for any HEI-employer relationships. Various definitions and conceptions exist within these relationships and amongst its stakeholders (Policy Research Institute and IES, 2006). There is no single agreed definition of what “employer engagement” means and its meaning often depends on the context in which the term is used. Where employer engagement is defined, it is often defined as either:

- a *process* through which employer directly participate in activity facilitated by an external organisation in pursuit of shared objectives (SSDA, 2007, p.3).
- or an *outcome*, where higher level of engagement is achieved by “encouraging businesses to invest in training and to get involved with the design and delivery of that training” (Cooper et al., 2010, p.8).

In context of the present case, the term “employer engagement” refers to that employers are actively engaged in the design and delivery of initiatives and provision – helping to ensure qualifications right and relevant to the business needs specifically through a process of collaboration in curriculum development. In terms of collaborative curricula or programmes, types of employer engagement might include discussions about skills, qualification and training requirements; employers’ involvement in curriculum working groups, designing courses, etc.; employers offering students work-based learning opportunities, projects, placements, work experience; provider/employer/learner negotiated programmes to support continuing professional and workforce development etc. (Scesa & Williams, 2008, p.2).

Stark (1998) stated that professional (and vocation-oriented) programmes generally are more externally oriented and influenced by external stakeholders than academic-oriented programmes. She argued that the type of service and competencies that professional programmes provide, the underlying values and the educational content is negotiated with external community of practitioners, for instance with employers and representatives for the professional field, or joint councils of academics and practitioners. Where the link is well developed, practitioners/employers’ influences affect professional requirements, accreditation standards, codes of professional ethics, and provisions of integrative opportunities for students (Stark, 1998, p. 367). This calls for employer engagement along several lines (i.e. different work-based learning relationships with employers, consortium professional programmes, etc.), and the curriculum becomes a core site, which requires greater collaboration between educators and practitioners/employers. In this regard, Junghagen (2005, p.72) introduced a conceptual model for curriculum development (Figure 2.1):

Figure 2.1 Curriculum Development Model



Source: Junghagen (2005)

In this model, four dimensions are expected to develop by working with employers. The central dimension of the model is defining a perception of future practice. This perception is expected to develop over time and is dependent on information gathered by way of ongoing relations with industry through research activities, student projects in industry, or Advisory Board, etc. This perception then gives rise to a certain qualification profile of graduates needed to live up to the requirements in future practice. These two dimensions constitute competency goals/learning outcomes for the study programme. To reach competency goals requires the presence of content and process of programmes and pedagogical principles, both of which are aligned with the competency goals (Junghagen, 2005, p. 73). Junghagen's model indicates that both the content and process dimensions of curriculum is important for HEI/employer collaboration, and these different dimensions need to be taken into account (with defining a perception of a future practice as a central one) when constructing a curriculum. The following part will look into what we know about these issues from previous research.

2.2 Prior Research on Collaborating with Employers in Curriculum Development

2.2.1 HE-Employer Collaboration in Curriculum Design and Delivery

Current research continues the employability and workforce development discourses raising issues on the effectiveness of various methods of collaborating with employers in curriculum

development. In practice, the HEI-employer relationships identified have formed a number of case studies where employers' higher learning needs are being met by HE providers. These studies give examples of a number of forms of collaboration ranging from the provision of customised single-company (Keithley & Redman, 1997) or consortium programmes (Edwards, et al., 1993; Smith & Betts, 2003) for MBAs and other specialist awards such as foundation degrees; teaching company schemes (Peattie, 1993); and different work-based learning programmes, etc. Specifically in the area of management programme development, the new collaborative model features a "learning partnership" involving a mixture of learning, consultancy and research. The following part will first look at relevant studies regarding HEI-employer collaboration in curriculum planning and design and then discuss their collaboration in curriculum delivery.

a) Collaboration in Curriculum planning and design

Current research shows that employers have shared responsibility for curriculum planning, offer support through improved needs and labour market analysis for providing focused programmes of learning (Drake, et al., 2009; Schneider & Pickett, 2006). This has been conducted in consultation with employers, sector group, or the established network with employers. Another key theme in this regard concerns identifying graduates' skills and competencies based on surveys and interviews aimed at what employers require of graduates. Cox & King's (2006) presented a "skills set approach" to identify skills sets in relation to the established industry roles through interviews with employers in the computer and information industry. Ferrin et al. (2001) described the use of Delphi study technique for curriculum design by obtaining opinions from a selected group of practitioners on the skills and competencies needed by graduates being hired for entry level positions in purchasing and materials management positions.

An interest in collaborative curriculum design has also been observed in Schneider and Pickett's study (2006). They described how educators and practitioners work together to develop an engineering course to address the relevance and professional standards of the programme. In particular, they discussed how partners with different backgrounds interact (i.e. information change, sharing ideas) during the development process and indicated that language and professional cultural differences needed to be overcome for a shared understanding of both engineering and education.

b) Collaboration in curriculum delivery

In terms of course delivery, collaboration with employers is often through “live” work-based assignment and learning that can provide students with the opportunity to undertake problem-solving tasks in a “real world” situation. These are achieved either by employers teaching as a guest speaker (Ducrotoy, 2001) or by students having a work placement or other structured work experience programmes with an employer. For instance, Neumann and Banghart (2001) described the need and how a “consulternships” was established and managed through HE-industry partnership based on a case study, where management students were placed on in-company consultancy projects to act as consultants and analysts. Thomas and Grimes (2003) reported on an evaluation of the design and implementation of the first year delivery of a graduate apprenticeship programme in hospitality management. The authors conclude that the development of the relationship between the employer and the institution needs careful management. Employers need to contribute to the learning environment through its creation and management. Thus, in order to achieve the goals of students, industry and education, the relationship needs to develop a reciprocal approach.

Some institutions involve employers further in assessment of student learning (i.e. their assignments). Such experience was reported by Sheehan and Waghom (2005) in a case study of having employer involved in reviewing and drafting problem-based Work Related Assessment (WRA) programmes. The assessment vehicles used included integrated assessment across modules, onsite group work, or case study where the company is seeking solutions from students to real work-based problems. Based on the feedback gained through workshops with students, faculty and employers, this research revealed that employers should be involved both in the assessment design and management. More preparatory collaboration was to be initiated between lecturer, employer and business managers to reduce any variance of student experience. Other ideas that came of the study were to involve all the managers from the beginning and to gain their commitment, and to give students ongoing support provided by employers during the assessment process.

2.2.2 HEI-Employer Collaboration and Employer Engagement: Conditions, Barriers and Good Practice

Potential barriers to effective work-related programme developments in such HEI/employer relationship have been identified in the related literature. Reeve and Gallacher (2005) defined

them as: limited evidence showing that employers wish to engage; cultural differences in the partnership (i.e. the incompatibility of the aims of the two stakeholders, particularly the different understandings in terms of knowledge); and unfavourable institutional settings. Consistent with the arguments of Reeve and Gallacher (2005), Hillier and Rawnsley (2006) highlighted the similar issues in their study. They advised caution assuming that employers can fully participate in the design, delivery and assessment of any new work-based learning programme; and employers may continue to resist engagement in education since their main activity is to run a successful business which makes a profit. In terms of collaboration in assessment, Sheehan (2004) further pointed out that there are issues surrounding the nature and level of employer engagement in terms of commitment levels, available time and consistency of judgment. Quality assurance issues can also be problematic in this regard.

Previous studies have also informed lots of good practice which will contribute to refining the curriculum and skills about working in such partnerships. When analysing a case of collaborative work-based learning curriculum, Benefer (2007) perceives the key success factors in a more general way as: strong vocational focus, involvement of employer in designing and providing “real” projects, integration of work-based learning and academic learning, and student support by company-based mentoring, etc. Välimaa (2006) states that the willingness and capacity of private and public employers to interact with HE establishments is essential precondition of success in this area. Similar to this argument, Blake and Drake (2009) regard successful partnership working as requiring: being responsive to employer needs and gaining commitment of employers. To achieve this, university should develop work experience activities and consultation with professional bodies and regionally-based groups (Morgan et al., 2004), recognise what is good in workforce learning and development, and add values to employer through HE. This view was also reflected in the York Consultancy’s (2004) evaluation report on foundation degrees, which indicated employer engagement is often more effective when this takes place through employer networks and groups. Employer involvement is more effective when it can be tailored to the individual sector/Foundation Degree course.

More specifically, Foskett (2005) stated that the general factors that lead to successful and sustainable partnerships are also important when engaging in needs-led curriculum development with employers. The success strategies identified according to this conclusion included complementary aims, compatible missions, good personal relationships, clear

responsibilities and mutual trust, together with the effective communication and persistence in managing the partnership that was emphasised in Rowley's study (2005). In addition, it was also recommended that the HE-business cooperation should be based on simultaneous agreement at all levels of the two cooperation partners (Tynjälä, Välimaa, Boulton-Lewis, 2006, p. 47).

The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) for Higher Education (2005) undertook a survey of 34 foundation degrees to find out how they had developed since they were first surveyed in 2002-03. The report notes that students benefit most from employer involvement when employers are consulted about the programme at the planning stage, and are involved in the design stage and its regular monitoring and enhancement thereafter (QAA, 2005, p.22). Other benefits accrue from employer involvement in specifying the outcomes for, and the supervision of, periods in work; and the design and marking of assignments, and the delivery of the programme, clear information about the programme for employers, three-way agreements, and the maintenance of effective liaison between employers and the academic team.

As the literature review makes clear, key stakeholders and partner employers are involved in programme and curriculum design and development to some extent. Employer involvement is mixed and varied, depending on the nature and type of the degrees and programmes. The following case study will frame a wider case of collaborating with employers in curriculum development. The previous studies have also indicated that it is difficult to design and implement collaborative curricular activities within a range of disciplinary traditions and in the complexity of a variety of HEI-employer relationships. This thus leads to a further research in the present study to investigate how both collaborators interact during the development process instead of simply looking at employer input or engagement issues. In addition, the literature review has further shed light on some practice for achieving effective HEI-employer collaboration, but rare studies have looked into the content and processes of collaborative curriculum development. This determined the focus of this research is to look into a process probing into all the aspects of collaborative curriculum development – how it has been established, implemented, maintained and developed.

2.3 Analytical Framework

Stark and Lattuca (1997) gave a definition to curriculum as an educational plan and considered curriculum development as a planning process. They also proposed a model of “academic plans in context” where student learning and curricula are created, making explicit the many factors that influence the development of academic plans in HEIs: (a) external influences (such as employers and accreditation agencies) and (b) internal influences that have been further divided into institutional-level influences (goals, leadership, governance) and unit-level influences (such as programme goals, faculty beliefs, or student characteristics). External groups such as employers, exert strong and direct influences on academic programmes, for-profit institutions, and some professional fields (for example, business) (Lattuca & Stark, 2009, p. 6). Those external demands acted upon curriculum make it necessary to use a “participatory approach (Van Crowder, 1997)” to curriculum development, whose emphasis is the use of input of various interested groups or educational stakeholders (including employers/practitioners) into the process of curriculum developments. This consideration of curriculum development as a planning process by Lattuca and Stark will help us identify the parts of the plan that are particularly sensitive to specific external forces, and reveals intervention points for productive curriculum change (Lattuca & Stark, 2009, p. 13). Thus, the present research will employ a process perspective on curriculum development, in particular examining the parts of the curriculum influenced by employer involvement.

According to Lattuca and Stark (2009, p.15), each of the eight elements incorporated in the academic plan implies an associated planning step for curriculum development:

- **PURPOSES:** choosing educational goals and objectives
- **CONTENT:** selecting subject matter
- **SEQUENCE:** organising content appropriately
- **LEARNERS:** accommodating characteristics, goals, and abilities of learners
- **INSTRUCTIONAL RESOURCES:** selecting learning materials and technologies
- **INSTRUCTIONAL PROCESS:** developing learning and teaching activities
- **EVALUATION:** assessing student outcomes as well as learner and teacher activities
- **ADJUSTMENT:** improving both the plan and the planning process

Breaking down the planning process in this way enables us to ask questions about the process itself. In this way, we can look into how HEI-employer interactions that may affect decision-making about the curriculum in each of the planning phases. Lattuca and Stark’s “academic plan” concept thus provides a framework for the present study and can be adapted to the

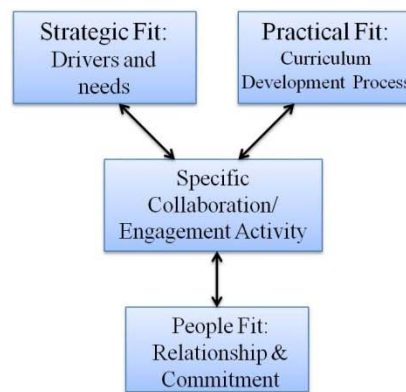
context of HEI-employer collaboration in curriculum development. The different steps relate to some core questions to be dealt with and achieved agreement upon in the process of developing and delivering the curriculum. These questions can be summarised as:

- **PURPOSES:** What are the purposes set for the curriculum with attention to market /industry needs? And what are the learning objectives designed for both educational and skills development?
- **CONTENT:** How do developers design curriculum that balances a focus on subject matter?
- **LEARNERS:** How do developers customise the education/learning to meet the needs of a specific group of learners or the employers based on the needs identified?
- **INSTRUCTIONAL RESOURCES:** How do employer input and resources help create various types of educational experience?
- **INSTRUCTIONAL PROCESS:** How do employers involve themselves in teaching and learning activities to support students' learning?
- **EVALUATION:** How do the results of courses and programmes, as well as the learning outcomes of students, be evaluated and improved? How is employer feedback used for assessing student performance?
- **ADJUSTMENT:** How do programmes and HEI achieve the needed curriculum change with employer feedback or input? How do administrators promote continuing attention to curricula and support a culture of improvement?

Their eight elements serve the double purposes of a) describing steps in curriculum development which need to be considered in all education programmes, and b) the eight elements may also be used as analytical categories for researchers who aim to describe and analyse curricula and curriculum development. (For instance, what kind of purpose is dominating in a given curriculum – fostering employability, workforce development, or more general human development?) In the present study, the researcher will use them as analytical dimensions to reveal core aspects of both the process and content of curriculum development, which covers *design* (setting purposes, selecting appropriate content and instructional resources for fitting learners' requirements), *delivery* (teaching/learning practice, evaluation), and *review* (revising and making improvement), with an emphasis on HEI-employer collaboration.

Since the focus of the present research is on engaging employers through collaboration, it is reasonable not only to look at the planning process but also on the collaborative process of realising the plan/delivering the curriculum. For this purpose, Connor and Hirsch (2008) organised dimensions of curriculum development differently, with emphasis given to the collaboration and engagement activity. In order for effective HEI-employer collaboration to develop, Connor and Hirsch (2008, p. 9-10) have suggested that there needs to be an alignment between the needs and drivers (strategic fit); processes, structures and resources (practical fit); and relationships and commitment (people fit) of both HEI and employers. Specifically in the present case study, these three key dimensions can be interpreted as (Figure 2.2):

Figure 2.2 Engagement Opportunities and Dimensions



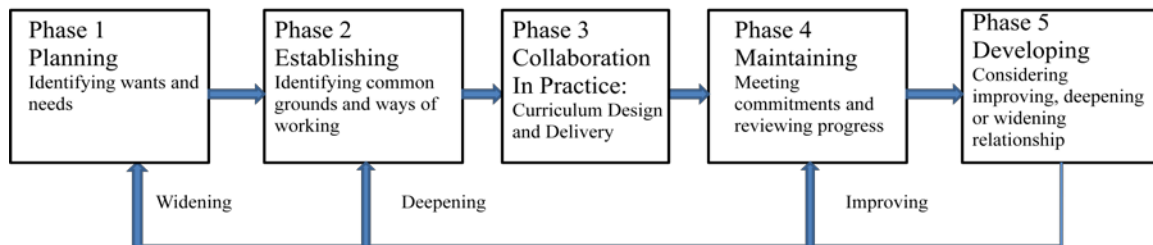
Source: Connor and Hirsh, 2008.

“Strategic Fit” refers to whether there exist strategic reasons for potential collaboration between HEI and employers. It concerns about whether the new qualification can fill the market gap and be aligned with the specific business needs and company’s strategy for employee development. “Practical Fit” refers to the processes– specifically in this case study, it means how this collaborative curriculum has been designed, delivered, and reviewed. Each of the planning phases has to consider the needs in relation to what is required by both parties. The last dimension relates to getting right people work effectively in the relationship/collaboration, i.e. what are the specific roles and responsibilities of the respective partners; how the interests of different participants involved can be managed; how a good working relationship between academics and employers can be maintained, etc.

Connor and Hirsch’s model specifies *the content dimension* in relation to HEI-employer collaboration. Then Cooper et al. (2008, p. 47) have further identified *the phases and process*

of development initiative again and specify this in the context of collaboration. These phases of collaboration development are “preparing, establishing, implementing, maintaining, and developing (Figure 2.3).”

Figure 2.3 Five phases of curriculum development through collaboration



Source: Cooper et. al (2008)

Planning phase is to identify objectives and rationale for collaborative effort from a strategic level (Cooper et. al, 2008, p.46). For the HEI managing the engagement/collaboration process, this includes identifying and meeting employers’ specific needs.

Phase two is establishing the relationship. In this phase all organisations involved identify how their interests and objectives overlap and identify how the engagement activity is taken forward (Cooper et. al, 2008, p. 47). This phase includes identifying the aims and scope of the collaboration in curriculum development, i.e. roles of all the partners; driving interests for the engagement; joint exploration of what is needed, etc.

The following step is the implementation of the collaboration – in the present case study – designing and delivering an appropriate curriculum.

Phase four aims to maintain the collaboration for the duration of the process. Phase three primarily involves participants delivering their commitments and reviewing whether the activity is both progressing as expected and still meeting their objectives. Cooper et al. (2008, p. 47) suggests that high quality information flows, personal relationships and trust are crucial for this phase of the process. This means that HEI develops mechanisms to facilitate such collaboration or engagement.

The final phase can be summarised as developing employer engagement process and the established relationship. Specifically in this case study, this means that HEI intends to further involve employers in the curriculum activities, deepen the collaboration and evolve it into a fully integrated partnership.

In summary, Stark and Lattuca's "academic plan" will give a general perspective on curriculum and curriculum development, while Connor and Hirsch (2008) and Cooper et al. (2008) in different ways specify the content and process of curriculum development in the context of HEI-employer collaboration. Thus, my analysis in the Chapter 4 will follow the sequence of the five phases of collaboration as presented in Figure 2.3, and discuss the content and collaborative process in relation to the dimensions presented in Figure 2.2 and also in relation to the findings from previous research.

3 Methodology

In order to get in-depth information about the research questions posed in Chapter 1, a case study approach was chosen to explore HEI-employer collaboration in curriculum development. This chapter will discuss the research methodology including study design, data collection strategies, selection of informants, and the instrument used. It will also describe the analysis approach used to arrive at conclusion.

This study is designed as exploratory, descriptive research using qualitative methods. The case study method has been adopted to meet the primary goal of this research serving as “an empirical enquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context” (Merriam, 1998, p.27). The value of this method as a research tool is its ability to get in-depth insights into processes, activities, or various perspectives and opinions at close range, thereby enabling the researcher to interpret the reality of participants’ experience, and develop a grounded understanding of how that behaviour or process has taken place (Chetty, 1996). From this perspective, this approach is deemed a more appropriate strategy that is able to explore the various participants’ perspectives concerning collaborative curriculum development and probe in detail of issues relating to how the curriculum initiative has been developed and managed.

The selected case studied an EMBA curriculum development at BI Norwegian School of Business (Handelshøyskolen BI). The selection of the case was based on the following reasons: First, this MBA qualification offered is industry specific and has a strong practical focus, so it is easier for the researcher to look into how the programme team has adapted their curriculum to the industry/employer needs; Second, the education provider has established collaboration with some of leading employers in the industry, although not on a formal basis. Cooperation and interaction with employers in designing and delivering the curriculum has been a part of their operations, so this has allowed opportunities for close examination of their collaborative development activities.

The data collection strategy adopted for this study was the documentation analysis and semi-structured interviews. Instruments used to collect data included an interview guide. The research was carried out in two stages. The initial access to the case study programme was gained through contacts with the Directors of MBA studies, who gave a brief introduction of

the programme and provided all the programme information required by the researcher. The first stage contained a documentation analysis and context-setting literature review. The documentation consulted included validation document, Advisory Board meeting minutes, student evaluation results, and introductory information of this MBA programme on website. Additionally, the curriculum and description of courses and their outcomes were further analysed. The document analysis allowed constructing an overview of this MBA curriculum regarding its relevance to industry needs and focus on employer involvement. After initial within-case analysis had been conducted, the present MBA case was compared and discussed with those key themes identified in the related studies described in the literature review. The first stage work helped explain certain aspects of the collaboration and generated key themes to follow up in the second interview stage.

In the second stage, semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants to collect more in-depth information on themes identified in the first stage. According to Weise (1994), the interview method was useful in the present case study because it is able to develop detailed descriptions, integrate multiple perspectives, describe the process, and learn how events are interpreted. It would also allow the research to “gain in the coherence, depth, and density of the material each respondent provides (Weiss, 1994, p. 3).” By focusing on a sample very much smaller and tailoring interview to each respondent, it would yield more in-depth insights into different people’s experience and stories and therefore provide the researcher with a fuller understanding of the experiences of the respondents. In this way, it will do better than using a survey study that normally generates much more superficial information by soliciting brief answers to survey items. Semi-structured interview can group some well-thought topics and questions for investigation in advance, which may enhance the quality of the research. It is also preferable because the interviewer can ask in different ways for different participants and thus makes it possible to see the similarities and the differences of each partner’s perception of the collaboration. Therefore, interview is considered a proper method of investigating the collaboration process, content, practices, challenges in sufficient detail to reach conclusions.

The aim of selecting informants was to “develop a wide-ranging panel of knowledge informants” that serve as a sample of representatives (Weiss, 1994, p. 17). The selected informants were identified as having significant involvement in collaborative curriculum activities. They consisted of different participants that involved in the curriculum

development: two programme directors/administrators and two faculty staff from the higher education side, and two partner employers including an industry consultant and an Advisory Board member from the industry side. This selection enabled that the research participants were knowledgeable concerning the curriculum collaboration under study and that different perceptions of participants were assessed. It needs to clarify that students' views were not sought through interviews, because the research questions guiding the study focus on curriculum development and not on how the programme is perceived by students. The selected informants from both the academic and industry world were able to ensure that the views of both parties of "collaborators" were adequately represented and gave enough information on the research questions.

After a group of informants had been decided, an interview guide (Appendix I) was then developed to organise the interviewing. The guide was structured following the analytical framework of the study and probing into the processes and content of the collaborative curriculum activities. The purpose of the interview was to collect the experience of the participants and gather narrative stories about their collaboration in curriculum development. In alignment with the analytical framework there were five themes of questions identified, aiming to clarify the issues of context, relationship building, curriculum design and delivery, relationship maintaining, and relationship developing. Specifically, the theme of questions concerned with "curriculum design and delivery" would help answer the research question of "how HEI and employers collaborate in developing and delivering a curriculum in the case study"; and those questions concerned with "relationship maintaining" would let know "the conditions, challenges for collaboration and how they are solved"; While by looking into the whole process through which the collaboration had progressed (as the way the questions were structured), it would inform some good practice in the present case study, thus help clarify the last research question for "effective collaboration".

A total of five face-to-face semi-structured interviews and one telephone interview were conducted for assessing different perceptions of the selected informants. The telephone interview was used because the intended informant was hard to access and schedule a longer time for the interview. Brief letters introducing the research project were distributed to these informants before the interviews. Each face-to face interview lasted about 50-60 minutes, and the telephone interview with one of the board member lasted 15 minutes. The face-to-face interviews were conducted at the interviewee's jobsite to make the location convenient to

both the researcher and the interviewees. All the interviews have been recorded and transcribed to secure an accurate account of the conversations. The questions asked during the interviews further investigated the areas of interest such as formation of the collaboration, specific implementation practices such as curriculum design and employer input, the complexity and working of the relationship, and challenges and effective practices, etc. Following the general interview guide, each of interviews was specifically structured to focus on the respective roles and responsibilities of each participant in the development process so that more detailed and specific data will be solicited.

According to Stake (1995), data analysis for case study research can commonly be conducted using detailed descriptions of the case, categorical aggregation, and naturalistic generalisations. Detailed descriptions provide the setting, participants, and interactions needed to gain background of the case being studied. For this study, a detailed description of the series of events that occurred during the collaboration process and a description of the curriculum activities are supplied to provide the context and setting for the case.

The data was assessed and interpreted through an iterative process of content analysis. This process involved the aggregation of individual instances until a conclusion can be made about them as a group (Stake, 1995). Each interview transcript was studied, searching for the repetition of consistent patterns or discrepancies to identify themes and issues of interest emerging from the information (Stake, 1995). This analysis involved a reading and re-reading process to look for the patterns, topics, or issues within frame of the research questions in the present study. Based on the analytical framework, the researcher organised the data alongside the process of collaboration, and then further categorised the data into sub-themes (i.e. topics, issues, challenges, or solutions) and looked into specific practices in each of the collaboration phase. Some common themes that occurred were skills improvements, culture differences, the extent of employer engagement, commitment issues, and better initial agreements, etc. The researcher finally interpreted the information to shed light on the practices and activities of collaborative curriculum development, the specific issues affecting it as well as the possible solutions for more effective collaboration. The findings of the qualitative study were supported by quotations and case descriptions. To limit the possibility of interpretative bias inherent in this approach, the data was reported using interviewees' own statements and wording where possible (Easterby-Smith et al., 2002).

The limitations of this study will be discussed in Chapter 5.

4 Working with Employers in Curriculum Development: the Case Study

This chapter presents a case study of how one business programme works with employers in developing a curriculum that is meeting the needs of industry. It looks into collaborative efforts between BI and employers for improved curriculum planning and delivery in order to understand the main processes and relationships underpinning employer engagement and collaboration activity. More specifically, it makes explicit some core issues in this development initiative whilst also trying to address the pragmatic issues that arise for effective collaboration. It is not intended as a best practice per se, but rather as “practice” or “pilot initiative” that investigates developing and delivering curriculum in a collaborative context.

4.1 Context

As a private and market-driven business institution in Norway, BI Norwegian School of business (BI) has been actively looking for the niche market and seeking ways of enhancing student recruitment. Having a natural link with the business world, education planners of BI have been working hard at improving relationship with local strategic stakeholders. The potential of collaborative relationships with industry has been regarded as one way of realising the value of their course provision and enhancing the recruitment of students, particularly for those seeking practice-based education. The need for an integrated curriculum is within this context and considered as a means of remedying both the knowledge acquisition and the application focus that is lacking in the traditional curriculum. This is especially the case of Executive MBA programme in Shipping, Offshore and Finance (EMBA SOF) at BI.

With the intention to establish the possibility of a “bridge” between the values and aims of higher education and those of employment, the Executive MBA programme in Shipping, offshore and Finance was validated and approved by the Undervisningsutvalget (UUV), the Academic Board of BI in 2009. The programme was initially established in partnership with Nanyang Business School (NBS) and undertaken in collaboration with local employers who were equally keen to respond to the learning and professional development needs expressed

by practitioners. As a work-based qualification, the degree is expected to help develop global leadership skills for executives working in the shipping and offshore sector and to provide an understanding how executives within the industry manage their organisations. Initial cohorts of participants were largely made up of advanced practitioners and senior managers in shipping industry. The major step of its launch involved the convening of an advisory board, where about 30 important industry players joined. Faculty members in both BI and NBS were responsible for formulating the modules and course specifications and made sure that the courses of great practical value to industry had been designed.

This programme was seen as a pilot initiative of integrating employer input into the curriculum development process. The main purpose of the curriculum was intended as both professionally and academically credible, with distinctive features as follows:

- Employer involvement, in relation to demand, design, delivery and review;
- Global learning arena that focuses on regional real-life business issues;
- Module-based curriculum with a clear focus on a specific industry;
- Course delivery rooted in the practical lessons of case-method;
- Flexible part-time programme that enables candidates to combine executive studies with full-time employment;
- Cross-cultural and interactive learning environment that provides excellent international networking opportunities (Validation document).

These key characteristics of the MBA degree have guided the development of the curriculum. In particular, this case highlights a body of practices when a HEI is trying to engage with employers to work with curriculum development in a collaborative context. This feature is more unusual and distinctive in Norwegian higher education context and thereby worthy of wider discussion.

4.2 Planning and Establishing the Collaboration

Identifying and prioritising the critical needs in the industry is a precondition to the success of a business programme. Early in the planning stage, the programme team conducted a systematic process beginning with analysis of employers' future hiring needs in shipping and offshore industry. This research of the needs involved a consultation process through Norwegian Shipowners' Association across a number of leading employers in the industry,

seeking to understand the business models of shipping and offshore companies and skill-related barriers to expansion. The Director of the MBA studies described the efforts and conclusion like this:

“We [programme team] created the very first conversation in the region about employers’ workforce needs in the industry. There were two emphases in the industry: one is the demand for technical expertise; the other is that top managers in the industry are reaching retirement age. This is a generation shift, particularly in the shipping industry. So we see the education needs coming from this market.” (Director, MBA Studies)

Initial investigation showed that it was a sector keen to recruit higher level executives, which was not traditionally served with graduate or postgraduate education. BI had a desire and capacity to professionalise the sector and to address “seniority” problem due to lack of high skills demanded by larger employers. The competitive analysis further revealed that of the few business schools at that time offered an MBA Shipping and Offshore concentration. An EMBA degree in Shipping, Offshore and Finance was thus designed for those employed in the sector that were skilled and seeking a professional advancement through management level. In informing the identified needs, the faculties at BI and NBS, as the designers of the programme, developed the general mission and aim of the programme:

“To develop global leadership skills for executives working in the shipping and offshore sector.” (Validation document)

The clarification of the aim in the planning phase of this MBA programme was really market- and industry-driven by understanding the sector and designing a programme accordingly. This aim, in the beginning, allowed a shared vision to develop and facilitate the combined efforts towards a shared commitment for increasing workforce’s skills. After employers had been consulted at a broad strategy level and a sector level, BI began to develop relationships with individual companies. The important step was the recruitment of an Advisory Board composed of strategic partner employers. An experienced practitioner, who was able to relate more closely to the business, was employed by BI as an intermediary responsible for the recruitment. About 30 top executives from companies on a global scale within the industry finally became the members of the board. The key collaborative issues in this MBA programme development were discussed through board meetings, including the purpose, the agendas, the functions of the Advisory Board, and the benefits that both parties may get from this collaboration, etc.:

“We discuss what these collaborative efforts should be about, what we can bring to each other for this specific programme. We saw very soon what we could bring to them was, of course, management education. BI is a strong institution that is focusing on the industry which it works in, which is obviously important to them [employers]. From their perspective, they [employers] could bring guest lectures, promote programmes in different companies, and come in to give the advice on the development of the programme. We had a few meetings at the earliest stage and discussed how we should do it in the first year, what should be the roles of the advisory board, and how they should work together with BI.” (Director of MBA Studies)

Through the initial discussions they arrived at that employers on the Advisory Board should function to:

- Assist with advice on the development of the programme, i.e. focus areas, trends and skills needs in the industry;
- Participate board meetings and social events with students;
- Contribute as guest lecturers;
- Promote this programme through their business networks. (Board meeting minutes)

These roles of employers for the initial implementation of the collaboration as defined above shows that their input mainly focused on advising and giving feedback on the curriculum planning and design. In fact, at the beginning, this programme still relied much on the negotiation of the curriculum content within the parameters that were prescribed by the Academic Board of BI and described and determined by the faculty.

The collaboration building was a process that required negotiation, with the aims of achieving clear and well understood of roles and responsibilities, and benefits of each of the stakeholders taking in the programme (Jones, 2000; Tett et al. 2001; Clegg & McNulty, 2002). In the beginning, BI and partner employers clarified a shared vision, driving interests for engagement, and jointly explored what was needed for the collaborative initiative. This would best direct their efforts towards the curriculum development. However, what had been agreed by both partners could not be formalised through an agreement or contract, and then subscribed to by each other. As a result, it may weaken the position to secure employers and faculty's commitment to provide resources and invest time necessary to undertake curriculum development. This problem was quoted by an Advisory Board member:

“You want things to work systematically? Yes. I think agreement will make sure that you do some things. It will push you a little bit more if you have a contract or agreement. You must advise an agreement each year to see: Did we use it? How did we use it? Was it mutual benefit or one-sided? ...I think there must be a very clear mandate for the advisory board, if you are vague about roles that the advisors should play, then that will be another critical point.” (Advisory Board member)

This issue was later reflected in the difficulties of maintaining commitment from both academics and employers in the curriculum development process, and was further highlighted as the programme directors were trying to moving towards “a deeper integration” with employers.

4.3 Collaboration in Practice: Curriculum Development

The curriculum development of the MBA programme has demonstrated a process of the adaptation of the HE offerings to the needs of employers and creating a course and learning design that is suitable for the target group of participants/employees. This has been achieved by a collaborative relationship between academic staff and employers:

“There is the lack of well-built curriculum in shipping for years. We wanted to have a close relationship with industry to cross-check this is really what industry wants.”
(Professor, MBA studies)

In the present case study, employer input is especially helpful when it helps to identify knowledge and skills, develop courses and construct learning, and improve the curriculum.

4.3.1 Identifying Learning Outcomes

An effective educational programme cannot be delivered without making its learning outcomes explicit (Harden, 2002). This point has been emphasised by the curriculum team in providing a skills framework for curriculum development. Consultation with employers for this purpose sought to identify a clear statement of learning outcomes based around core competencies required by employers as well as the academic requirements:

“The bottom line is that this new programme can help develop leaders in shipping and offshore sector. We have a real incentive to make sure the competencies we are educating for are the ones that employers have set themselves.” (Professor)

An analysis was conducted to identify key learning outcomes and to ensure coverage of the domains of knowledge and skills. The most generalised competency desired of “executives in shipping and offshore industry” was “global leadership skills” – the ability to manage the organisation and apply theory and method within a strategy implementation and problem-solving context. According to it, learning outcomes should represent the following levels of intellectual demands, notably, thinking, leadership, communication and management. The faculty compiled an inclusive list of necessary knowledge and skills that may relate best to the development of the leadership skills in terms of these areas of competencies. Based on the listed knowledge and skills, interviews and survey was conducted to the members of the Advisory Board to get direct feedback on what they considered was required knowledge and skills for achieving the learning goal. The feedback by employers formed the basis for learning outcomes objectives of the curriculum. A framework was then devised to structure the outcome objectives for the EMBA programme under two headings representing academic and professional competencies. Key points included in this learning outcome statement were that the curriculum would be both “competency-based” and “highly integrated” of knowledge and skills:

- *Knowledge*

Participants will have in-depth knowledge within the shipping and maritime industry in the fields of marketing strategies and analysis, financial strategies, risk management, innovation processes, company strategies, leadership issues (crisis management, cultural intelligence, and management of human capital), etc.

- *Skills*

Participants will obtain the ability to analyse practical problems areas within the shipping and offshore sector. They will be able to propose solutions and make decisions that advance the overall objectives of the organisations. Key skills include strategic thinking, analysis, decision-making, innovation, business development, financial management.
(Validation document)

The results obtaining from direct employer input represented a firm, locally valid basis on which a relevant curriculum can be built. It was helpful to identify the mix of knowledge and skills needed for “executives in shipping and offshore industry”; the survey was built from an employer perspective, but also combined with the perception from the academic side. From that base both parties were able to develop a common understanding of the curriculum processes needed to contribute to learning success.

4.3.2 Course Design

The collaborative efforts towards course design paid tributes to ensuring curriculum content built in real business situation and practice and reflecting the skills requirements. The general approach to achieve this was through the integration of employer feedback and input with respect to the relevance and importance of the content, and provision of opportunities to develop participants’ leadership skills.

Employers’ input in terms of their involvement in course development was through their membership of Advisory Board, where employers could have access to course and module leaders for discussion and further adjustments. The board was helpful in meeting employer needs and incorporating professional standards and their valuable feedback may considerably influence the content of the curriculum:

“They feel that they can be involved in the course through the board. I’ve sent them over modules and things to look at and I ask them what they think they want. This means that when we go up to them, employers can take responsibility and understand what we [faculty] are trying to get from them and they understand that they have to take on some theory.” (Professor)

Apart from working with employers through the Advisory Board, the programme directors and faculty adopted a more proactive approach and consulted employers individually by employing two industry consultants. The course leaders (senior faculty members) took a lead role in developing course plan and liaised with industry consultants over “industry courses” and recruitment of business cases.

Distinctively, the curriculum was structured into two streams of “industry courses” and “general management courses”. The advice from the Advisory Board and practical content provided by the industry consultants would be integrated into the industry generic courses that

specifically targeted practical knowledge. Their input typically was up-to-date and relevant information, and practical topics grounded in the shipping and offshore practice:

“What we [faculty] can get from them [employers] is the information about current affairs and current state of the industry, and what are the challenges they are meeting right now. For instance, what are the consequences of financial crisis on industry, how do they feel..., that’s topics we get. These topics relate more to general strategy and how to deal with industry, with those managing companies in the industries. They’re more specific day-to-day issues, how to deal with the situation today, that’s what we use industry members for to come in and give advice on advisory board, we have two or three members from industry coming in and discussing certain specific issues.” (Professor)

This ongoing conversation between faculty staff and employers continued to serve as a forum where businesses in shipping and offshore industry could get together to weigh in on the latest trends affecting their businesses, talk about where demand is, and how to drive it; How curriculum may have a change as a result of it, etc.

In addition to current knowledge of the business, the co-designing with industry was also through their working together in constructing business cases and projects that would enhance the business and management skills contextualised to the industry. Like most of the business programmes, case-based learning was adopted as the main pedagogical method to achieve the learning goal. Considerable effort was therefore made to relate the course content to the roles and competencies that a senior executive was supposed to have in shipping and offshore industry, so that participants do “real” assignments in the real-life situations in order to develop their leadership skills. The development of these cases was highlighted in the discussions between the Advisory Board members and consultants:

“We can turn a project here into a case. We can neutralize it, take out the name and make it more general. Basically what I [industry consultant] bring to the table is a lot of relevant cases and then we can discuss theory and all the practical applications relevant to the students. The purpose here is to have a theory part and also a case work part which students would not have access to if we were not there.” (Industry Consultant)

The employer input in terms of current business knowledge and cases and projects had helped the content grounded in the reality of shipping and offshore practice: modules were contextualised through case studies and other real workplace assignments; and the

coursework focused on the sector with examples of shipping and offshore industries woven in to give broad business knowledge.

This course design was such a process involving lots of discussions and interactions between professors and employers on what knowledge counts, how it is to be represented, and what forms of pedagogical relationships should be appropriately bound. In this process, the interaction caused by different backgrounds and understandings led to a more relevant learning experience and a better linkage of theory and practice, as an industry consultant has stated that:

“What we do is basically that we throw the ball back and forward, I tell them what you should include. They tell me yes, I can do it this way or it will not work, and then we can go back and forward until we settle a programme. That is a good approach. If we have people who come from a wider background with different experience and different disciplines, then you really have a cross section of views that should be looked at. Testing theory against practice is very important. You can read the theory, but you cannot really learn something until you practice it. Then you can turn back and look at the theory, what it says is partly right, partly wrong.” (Industry Consultant)

The tension may also emerge due to different academic and organisational understandings in terms of learning and knowledge, particularly as staffs from two very different organisational cultures with very different ways of operating were brought into close contact (Keithley & Redman, 1997, p.164). These conflicts of values and perceptions were reflected in their adoption of different approaches to the course design: Practitioners tended to focus on immediate specific concerns and action, while theoretical concepts that were not seen to be directly relevant to the immediate work process were questioned by them. Ultimately, they may take a highly strategic and selective approach towards learning (Reeve & Gallacher, 2005, p.227), which was rather different from academic approach leading to wider educational objectives. This difference was admitted by both the industry consultant and the academic leader:

“There are some negative aspects of it. If my practical understanding, my cases can support and challenge the theory, and the only thing that I’m afraid of is that we come from the practical side and reject the theory sometimes. If we don’t understand the theory, we will shortcut it and do it in our way.” (Industry Consultant)

“When they [industry people] sit in the company and they concern about tomorrow, next week, that particular ship will go to that port... That’s we call ‘kitchen sink approach’. They tend to be like this. That’s why they need a programme that they can have a wide perspective (Dean, MBA programmes).

Under the circumstance, the programme leader did not see this as a problem, or even a “conflict”. Since the process of trust-building is itself seen as integral to the broader process of negotiating the inevitable ambiguities and complexity of co-working (Vangen & Huxham, 2003), he re-emphasised the importance of understanding and balancing the different perspective within a curriculum development activity:

“...So this is a balance of academic content and what industry thinks are relevant topics. I don’t see there’s a conflict here. If you do this right, there will not be problems.” (Dean)

It is worthy to point out that in the process of course design the faculty did not deliver exactly what employers demand but function as a leading actor taking part in driving and stimulating the development, even though the curriculum was also designed to reflect employer’s priorities in work and learning. This point was emphasised by the dean:

“We [academics] design the courses that industry itself thought was important. But we get what they feel are important right now that needs to be done with. Then we say ok some of the problems we want to deal with, some of the problems that we don’t think are important for a program like this. That’s where the balance comes in, because you cannot want all the courses being demanded by the industry. And we, from academic point of view, mean that this is a master’s degree, there are master degree required certain demand of quality in the courses, certain academic content in the courses. So the danger cost of designing a programme like this without talking to the industry would be a disaster; it will also be a disaster if you leave all the things to the industry.” (Professor, BI)

As suggested by McCuddy et. al. (2008, p.614), touting the development of practical and professional skills may sacrifice a more comprehensive education, in the experience of this MBA programme, the academics actually defended and sustained the educational values alongside the occupational competence to avoid the danger that “big picture” may be compromised.

4.3.3 Course Delivery and Support of Teaching/Learning

The participants' learning experiences, skills development and future professional advancement appeared essential to take into account in this MBA curriculum:

“There’s only one way to learn the demanding art of leadership – and that’s by leading. That is why this MBA education has been, and continues to be, rooted in the practical lessons of the case method.” (Programme Introduction Document)

Adopted as the general method to achieve the learning goals, case-based learning put great emphasis on the learning process that was constructed a reflection and representation of a business setting based on experience. Through case-based courses, learning team discussions, multimedia simulations and more, participants exercised the leadership skills that they would practice in business and beyond.

Such skills development can be more addressed through a problem-solving Consultancy Project jointly developed between the faculty team and a company. This was an innovative approach used to building and utilising relationships for project cooperation, where participant were placed on in-company projects to act as professional consultants or analysts. The project presented a typical consulting relationship between a company and external experts and thus reflected a blend of professional consulting engagement and project management by the company staff, the consultancy team (composed of 3-5 participants), and faculty members.

Initial dialogue between the programme team and the company developed a full awareness of the needs of the company/client based on the problem or project provided by the company, the project scope and particularly how the participants would be supported by them:

“This is an open opportunity to exchange ideas and support Consultancy Group’s work. We’re here together here to support the participants primarily. I wouldn’t have thought it would be that difficult for us [HEI] and the companies at the start of the project to identify what it is you’re looking for from this work, and just make sure the project during that period would enable participants to enhance their competencies, and also work best to the company’s benefits.” (Professor)

Both parties were aware that the consulting group would have a better chance at getting cooperation and positive results if they were appropriately supported, so a company representative was appointed as the primary contact within the company to provide resources and data to the team, and help them to learn the company culture and how they would fit in.

Early in the project, a cooperative and supportive employer was of great importance to the team, which was suggested by an advisor from the faculty:

“They [the company side] have interests in the sort of information the consulting team is acquiring. There’re often discussions with the team about what they’ve been doing in the project, how the project or whatever might fit, might contribute to the organisation”.
(Professor)

Most importantly, the support from the company side got them establishing communications with other employees. The consultancy team established the workplan to identify the specific steps and deliverables necessary to accomplish the project’s goals. Key milestones and deliverables were subsequently agreed and modified with the liaison with the company. Since a successful working relationship crystallises down to communication between clients and consultants (Fuller, 1999), the open and frequent communications between both parties actually minimised project difficulties. The point of ensuring good communication was emphasised by an executive in the company/Advisory Board member:

“I would think it would be better to have a more regular more formal process for us to actually talk to each other, ... we already have a regular checkpoint that makes both of us catch up about what’s happening at our organisation or happening in yours and just talk through any things that have come up.”(Advisory Board member)

During the implementation of the project, project management was shared between the faculty and students. One faculty member, as the advisor for the team, assumed responsibilities for project supervision and helping participants to reflect on their project experience. The company was not involved in difficulties arising in the project. It was up to each team member to accept individual responsibility for making the project a success. The outcomes of the project would be reported to executives and finally used by the company, but the employer side was not involved in any assessments of the project results or student performance.

In general, consultancy Project had an obvious strength to enhance the collaboration between the BI and employers. A professor stated like that:

“We need to make sure all parties have to know how we should involve in the project. We have a cooperative, supportive client [company], a team of experts... we have to communicate well and know what is happening at all times to make sure our work going

with company's needs; We also have very good quality of participants. It's a practical opportunity for them, to demonstrate skills and perform as a team..." (Professor)

It is important to make sure all parties have a crystal clear idea as to what a successful engagement will look like, what the final deliverables will include. The experience of this project work indicated that "with a cooperative, supportive employer, good communication process, a well-designed plan, and a high performing team, the university and the business may both win (Neumann & Banghart, 2001, p.11)."

BI programme staff not only worked with the industry involving students in live projects, but also in collaboration with a number of employers in delivering "industry generic courses". External practitioners were invited as guest lecturers to teach "industry" sessions, sometimes a session series, which aimed at providing insights into industrial examples and cases and making learning close to the working environment. Their continuous input in teaching ensured the curriculum having a currency in the workplace:

"We run seminars, we have shipping seminars to certain topics, one or two days seminars. We get continuous information from industry from what industry considers are important issue currently in the industry. That's why we brought guest lecturers..." (Professor)

These additional seminars by practitioners would be a useful addition to the curriculum. This was especially true for those areas that were poorly covered in the curriculum at present. The clear integration of the work elements with institution-based delivery may potentially lead to more engaging students. At present approximately 30% of teaching responsibilities were assumed by industry practitioners as guest lecturers. The heavy involvement of employer in teaching led to the consideration of quality issues, that is, how to guarantee meaningful input and instruction quality by employers. In BI's experience, it was the faculty course leaders that played a key role in managing the input of externals, ensuring practitioners exemplifying a diverse range of areas were selected and that guest lectures fitted within the parameters of a module. Moreover, the instruction quality of guest lecturers was also assessed by students.

The collaboration in teaching had as a result helped to establish wider contacts and thus enhanced the relationships between both parties: member employers of the board sent senior executives to the programme as tutors who might then serve on advisory boards or other programme initiatives; and it had also promoted the exchange of academic staff for business

needs and extended the collaboration to other fields more than curriculum development, i.e. in-house training, business consulting , and collaborative research, etc.

Working with employers in teaching and work-based project gave rise to a concern whether employers should be involved further in the assessment. Previous studies suggest that employer's support is also needed to facilitate participants/employees' approaches to assessment in a real-life situation, specifically in work-based learning programmes, since their comments and feedback is considered of great help for students to optimise their work and learning outcomes (Edmond et al., 2007; McEwen, et al. 2010). In the present case, employers could not involve in any student evaluations (formally or informally), the lack of their comments and feedback for the student performance was partly because academics were reluctant to recognise the role of employers for the fear of putting academic standards and quality at risk. This view was expressed by the dean:

"...so external people are not involved in the evaluations. If that happens, then we have problems with the ...To ensure that we maintain academic standards and quality, academic members must be responsible for each course and evaluations. We have to do it."
(Dean, MBA programmes)

While allowing employers a greater degree of participation had met oppositions from the academic side, the programme director was also sensitive to the extent employers wanted to be involved. Fully participation in the design and delivery tended to be over-ambitious, and that an over-zealous approach could be counter-productive.

"You have to strike the right balance in how much you interfere with the employer. Each is different. Too much involvement in delivery can deter some employers." (Director, MBA studies)

This view was also echoed in Hillier and Rawnsley's research (2006): it is not easily achieved that employers are involved in the summative assessment of student's work-related skills and that employer involvement requires careful nurturing.

4.3.4 Curriculum Review and Improvement

In the case of this MBA programme, curriculum review and improvement decisions were mainly based on the comparative or evaluative data generated from student evaluation and feedback. The programme leaders further incorporated meaningful employer opinions in the

periodic reviews of the curriculum as a diagnostic input for curricular change and re-design. For this purpose, employer needed to get enough information concerning the programme, so the programme team not only kept them informed by regular contacts, but they also produced evaluation reports for use by employers as part of the course evaluation process. The way of soliciting employer's opinions for improvement purpose was conducted in an informal way through in-depth conversation and discussions between faculty and member employers in the Advisory Board meetings. The use of employer input into the curriculum review was aimed at generating feedback in two areas of curricular concerns: a) course content and structure of the curriculum; and b) operation, with respect to the areas of good practice and concerns highlighted to course teams in the course delivery during the previous period:

“The way that we evaluate is basically during this module we invite the board for a meeting, we talk about what is happening doing this module. We talk about after how they see it at this stage, how they think has functioned, what should be done differently, what is working, what should be improved and grow to attract more people... We bring executives of all the industries that complement all these questions arisen. Based on that, we make decisions what we will do for the next period.” (Director of Studies, MBA)

In the present case, the periodic review in the first place demonstrated a responsive process to the changes in the business world. The structure and significant course components (e.g. focusing lines of this EMBA curriculum: shipping, offshore and finance) were monitored in accordance with the rapid changes in the industry that were suggested by employers:

“Advisory Board believed that offshore should do well in this curriculum because the shipping industry is in retreat in Norway and the offshore section is becoming increasingly larger and important.” (Advisory Board meeting notes)

The offshore part was generally weakly constructed in the existing curriculum. This also acted as a big issue as student feedback indicated that “the offshore portion of the curriculum was more leverandørorientert and conceptual content had not been communicated clearly enough (Board meeting minutes).” According to employers' advice and student evaluation results, BI agreed that there was a need for restructuring the curriculum in order to strengthen the offshore-focused part. However, the faculty encountered challenges for re-designing the offshore-focused courses due to the shortages of well-defined subjects and course materials. Given the situation, the programme team considered that they are going to “create a dialogue with industry support to construct the structure of shipping expertise” leading to a quality

improvement action plan (Board meetings minutes), and then they were planning to rebuild the main content of the curriculum with Advisory Board members.

What has been mentioned above is an example that through the board meetings, the updated information, progress and specific issues in delivering the curriculum were clearly informed to employers, and their meaningful proposals could potentially give rise to curricular changes or improvements. But it was also obvious that Advisory Board did not function a formal role in curriculum adjustments and whether to give advice was actually dependent on their own willingness or “voluntary work”. This issue was quoted by the Dean of MBA programmes:

“The advisory board has access to student evaluations, so they can come and response to that. But there’s no set up systematic way every year of you should do this, this and this. ...It’s up to the members of advisory board how they want to handle that. We don’t tell them what to do, they decide what to do, what kind of advice to give us.” (Dean, MBA programmes)

Moreover, it was also found hard to ensure continued input from board members for optimising the curriculum. The lack of commitment among some of employers made it really difficult to target their input to the best effect. A member of the board addressed the problem as follows:

“The advisory board cannot only meet twice a year, they must meet regularly more times during the programme to get the feedback on how the programme works. The Advisory Board must learn from the experience they [academics] have within the programme and respond to the changes, so faculty learn and can take that into account for the next phase of programme. If I go to BI, I participate in planning, helping the professors set up the program, and then I don’t do anything more, how can I improve and help them.” (Advisory Board member)

Having recognised the importance of using employer feedback on an ongoing basis to review and improve the provision, the programme directors took efforts in getting employers well informed of the details of programme progress and trying to “keep them in the loop”. They invited employer members to attend classes so that they would get direct employer feedback on course content and topics. The evaluations would consider the ongoing relevance, value, viability and sustainability of the topics over the coming years, taking account of the aims and learning outcomes of the courses in which it is offered.

While programme directors were taking efforts to involve employers further into curriculum issues, at the same time, they had to consider how the academic side would respond to those changes brought about by employers and how they may act on employer input. An administrator regarded it challenging in consequence of a closer relationship with employers:

“And I think there’s also a danger when we’re rebuilding a really strong network with industry. If we can’t see the faculty part that is able to follow up and incorporate those feedback and those opportunities that we have, they [employers] probably would not be so interested anymore, so it’s important for us [administrators] to continue this contact with industry that we also have a faculty that is willing to collaborate.” (Director, MBA studies)

The critical concerns had been raised regarding developing and ensuring positive working relationships during times of curriculum development and change. Negative dynamics between academics and employers may serve as an inhibitor for employers to future participating in this initiative. Therefore, the innovative ways of sustaining a collaborative working relationship was required.

4.4 Collaboration: Conditions, challenges and maintenance

In light of what had been achieved by the collaboration on curriculum development, further activity to review progress and enhance links between BI and industry was expected. Main challenges to collaborative working in developing the curriculum related to building commitments, understandings and trust among the faculty members and employers. This will require the “people fit” achieved in the academic-employers working relationship in order to get successful curriculum development result.

There were widely reported issue with the lack of engagement and commitment to the curriculum issues. Employers had varied in their engagement in the design of the course, from active participation and support in the design process to relatively passive membership of the Advisory board. On the other hand, the mixed feelings regarding the commitment were also reflected on the different attitudes of academics:

“Some professors believe they possess expertise and knowledge and skills, so for them sometimes it is difficult to integrate with people from industry and to go into collaborative efforts. Some faculty is more open-minded for this [practitioners are part of the planning

of the curriculum] and sees this as a mutual benefit for development of the program.”
(Director of MBA studies)

The directors of the programme identified time constraints as the biggest challenge that both academic staff and employers were unable to commit time to the development phase of the curriculum. Even though they really wanted to stimulate it, the issue seemed really hard for them to overcome. This may be related to the different drivers and needs in the two working contexts, as employers also have to give priority to their obligations in the industry. While it was difficult to getting the commitment, there were still some key factors identified by BI as contributing to engaging with both parties more effectively. The strategies relied on how effectively programme directors could incentivise their engagement, both in an organisational level and individual level as persons. This has been made clear by one of the programme directors:

“I have to really create a good programme, create something that can catch their attention in order to have them to come and to involve them more than giving guest lecture or giving feedback; I have to create something that from their perspective can give them real value, real value to them as persons, real value to the company; I have to do the same efforts with the faculty, and convince some of the faculty that bringing industry people together with the faculty in order to create a curriculum together. They have to see the full picture of benefits of it.”(Director of MBA Studies)

In this regard, considerable importance had been attached to the role of participants and their assignments in illustrating the benefits of this MBA degree to employers. In this way, it was not only getting participants but also engaging employer as well. Another less obvious way that employers benefit from the course was through interactions between participants for whom the school became a meeting place to do business. The employers saw this as an important way of developing and disseminating their ideas as well as spotting talent for more senior role.

On the academics' side, the faculties benefited not only from using valuable industry input to develop learning modules and subject matter, but also from getting the opportunity to work for the companies in the fields of business consulting, in-house training, new research, etc. Some of the faculty would see these as benefits and they could also make extra business out of this as important individual benefits.

Employers would participate more actively when they are supported and considered worthwhile throughout the collaborative process (McEwen et al., 2010), so the programme directors also thought of great importance having the effective mechanisms in place to improve communication and feedback and allow employer reflection on decisions made concerning curriculum issues. In the first place, employer links were facilitated by a contact point within BI that was responsible for coordinating employer contacts with regard to communication and information; and also strengthened by inviting employers to attend events, particularly those linked to students' work; Most importantly, the board meetings allowed getting employer updated on the progression of the courses, responding to issues that arose, and discuss new education and developments on the agenda. However, the loosely structured advisory board may weaken its role in engaging employers and providing more valuable input. The situation gave rise to a demand of establishing a formal collaborative structure, particularly with a clear mandate for the board members and the functions they should fulfil. This need was considered as an important step of improving the collaboration as was commented by the programme director:

“What I want is try to get the industry feel more attached to the programme, because the way advisory board is running now only depends on some people that are very enthusiastic. That means if these people are not enthusiastic, for some reasons, or change their positions or jobs and leave the board, we won't have board functions. So we need to get a closer and formal tie with the industry. The advisory board has to have a formal structure than it has today, because now it is very loose. ” (Director of MBA Studies)

A clear definition of roles and responsibilities may help to build trust by clarifying what each participating agency is responsible for and decreasing uncertainty about leadership, decision-making processes, and fairness among participating agencies (Pardo, et al. 2006, p.4).

Bounded by a formalised collaborative agreement, both academics and employers would have their responsibilities clarified and be expected to invest reasonable time and resources into curriculum issues when they have many other pressing priorities to consider.

It was further found out that it helped engaging employers when faculty took meaningful action on the feedback received from employers, in other words, to show that employer input had an impact on curriculum as a result of their involvement. This point has been emphasised by an industry consultant:

“If you don’t use what advisory board tells you, then you don’t need advisory board. If I go there and they listen to me, but don’t use it or see the interests of what I’m doing, then we don’t have an advisory board. If nothing happens or changes as a result why bother doing it. ... BI is known for both using that Advisory Board and board members as teachers on the program. That’s good, then these people help formulating the program, and then they go in and teach.” (Industry Consultant)

These engagement activities, to some extent, achieved a certain degree of commitment from both parties and ensured some enthusiastic and dedicated employers serving on the advisory board, but these activities had not yet acted efficiently enough for engaging them continuously.

While strong commitment was being stimulated, maintain a good collaborative relationship between academics and employers was also considered crucial to this MBA curriculum development. One theme concerning this related to the clarification of leadership roles in the development initiative. The current collaboration within the programme indicated clearly an unequal power relationship: the obvious locus of responsibility for the curriculum rested principally with academic staff that had a strong leadership and decision-making power, while employers had a limited role in “advising”. This reflected the academics’ anxiety about going too far in the direction towards this curriculum innovation, as a result, losing the confidence of the institution in the academic rigour and quality of programme as suggested in the comments by the Dean of the MBA programmes:

“To ensure that we maintain academic standards and quality, academic members are responsible for each course, me responsible for the whole programme. We can use external people in the industry as advisor, but they’re not responsible for the courses and evaluations of the programme. We have to do it. There’s a balance of what industry thinks are relevant topics. And we, from academic point of view, this is a master’s degree, which required certain demand of quality in the courses, certain academic content in the courses. It’s a master degree programme, so the control must be with the school. It has to be academic control...” (Dean, MBA programmes)

The experience of this MBA programme suggested that the strong and clear leadership of academics could, to the maximum extent, ensure the academic rigor of the programme while at the same time accepting an appropriate degree of practical, work-related components.

Nevertheless, on the other hand, their strong power might deter the further involvement of employers beyond the curriculum planning stage.

In this MBA case, sharing resources appeared to the collaborative developers as one of the solutions that would enable positive dynamics between academic staff and employers. In respect of this, collaborative research opportunities were created for them to study areas of mutual interest, which might be termed as “a learning area” by the director of the programme:

“Faculty have certain knowledge that industry people don’t have, and vice versa, so what we’re planning now is to set up integrated seminar, where faculty and people coming from the industry and somehow to teach each other. We bring in some of the faculty related to this programme who bring forward some of the research they have done in this area; People from the industry come in and talk about the certain areas they are interested in that are allied with interests we have in specific areas within this programme. We thus create a platform for learning, and I think this is a very useful way of doing it.” (Director of Studies, MBA)

In this way, the programme directors had developed a network of professional expertise and addressed the expectations of contributions of curriculum team members. Learning from collaborating partners, who have different educational backgrounds, experience and orientation, including practical experience in the industry, was of great important and could also potentially bridge the cultural differences between the both sides. This view was echoed by a member of the Advisory Board:

“It is a combination of knowledge (from faculty) and skills (from practitioners), the important thing is to show respect for others’ knowledge. If I feel I’m superior to you, because I know so much about something and you’re not giving me anything, I don’t want to work.”(Advisory Board member)

In this sense, accepting that all partners are equal contributors to curriculum development and showing respect for other collaborator’s knowledge base was crucial to the positive relationship between collaborators.

4.5 Deepening the Collaboration

In longer run the programme director intended this collaborative relationship with employers to evolve at set stages. This case study of the curriculum innovation points to some difficulties

in working in collaboration with employers that arose when powerful institutional agendas impinged on further development of the collaboration. In this MBA programme a potential obstacle to a deeper integration of employer in curriculum development lies within the institutional limitations of the HEI – the apparent absence of an imposed structure; and systematic and formalized collaboration was not highly valued as might be expected. This view was expressed by the Director of MBA Studies:

“I think in BI at least at this stage, we have not systematically worked in this type of collaboration in the development of curriculum in different types of programmes. It is not part of our strategic goal. It’s not like strategic focus, but it’s coming more and more now... To institutionalise it and to make it work in the long term basis is really hard. What we’re trying to do now is make a structure which could work in the long term. (Director of MBA Studies)

In addition to this, the programme needed to be under the scrutiny of the quality assurance process by the Academic Board of BI in terms of validation, curriculum, delivery, and evaluation. The process was based on more academic focused criteria, seeing providing an academically rigorous education as a general aim:

“We have academic board that I report to. If I want to make changes to the programme, I have to have the approval from the academic board of BI. They give the permission, because they are the ones in a sense that give permission to me from BI’s point of view.” (Dean, MBA programmes)

It was within the context that the programme directors adopted a stepwise approach (a three-step strategy) to engaging with employers, marked by a gradual progression. Ongoing work for deepening this collaboration included recruiting more employers into the Advisory Board, opening integrated seminars, establishing an undergraduate programme in shipping and offshore, etc. They were intending to gradually extend the collaboration at the current stage into a mutually beneficial, long-term partnership with employers, where “Reference Group” under the Advisory Board was established, who were meant to get a shared leadership and responsibilities for curriculum development. The programme director described the plan like this:

“So we have to build a foundation and from there we can try to develop it, to communicate and work together. It is a partnership. And always try to look for what are

the benefits for them if we move it to the next level. If they really see the benefits, you cannot move to the next level. It is very difficult. This is also a pilot initiative here in Norway. It is challenging if you bring in innovation, you have got cultural challenges, and you get different ways of seeing things...” (Director of MBA Studies)

It indicated in the director’s remarks that the institution needed to reflect and think about distinct contributions that both partners could make to each other in order to deepen the initiative to the next level. It also requires hard work developing an academic-dominated culture into a shared, collaborative thinking about the whole. The difficulty was identified from BI’s experience that there were even convergences between administrators and academic leaders over the issues of further evolving the collaboration. While administrators were intending to build the collaboration into a formal structure, the academic leader held a totally different stand against this. This can be reflected in the dean’s opinions concerning this issue:

That’s exactly what I [dean] don’t want to do. Then I will have to ask the board: What do you think we should change? What do you think about this? And why do you think this topic be different? It’s not them telling us what to change. We [academics] have to decide, otherwise industry people may come with very sensible proposals... We don’t want a formal organisational structure to tell us what to do. Advice is ok.” (Dean, MBA programmes)

Under this situation the programme directors had to overcome those convergences about ongoing agendas within the institution before moving for fully developed partnership in future. It really depends on programme directors’ strong motivations and their abilities to incentivise the participation of academics and industry. Even though it will be a hard job for them, as the programme director suggested:

“... but the way to make it function is quite hard, because academia and industry have totally different way of operating, so it can be very hard to make it work in practice. And meantime it is depending on individual’s strong motivations to do it, but to institutionalize it and to make it work in the long term basis is really hard.” (Director, MBA studies)

A number of challenges have presented themselves to be overcome in the process. The success of a partnership is attributed in large part to stimulating collaborators’ incentives and maintaining positive dynamics between them. This relationship needed time to develop and

was based on informal relations and small-scale basis rather than formal, institutionalised arrangements in the beginning.

There are several concerns that have arisen through the analysis of this case study. The first question raised here relates to the extent of employer engagement, that means, whether employer could be further involved in work-related assessment or provide other means of support for student learning while they are willing to contribute to the curriculum design stage. Another practical issue is whether both collaborating parties can be reasonably engaged and committed. There seems to be a demand for more effective ways that would help support the development of engagement, and more importantly, sustaining their input in a continuous way. The complexity of academics-employer relationship has appeared itself as a major concern, too. The issues such as leadership, ownership, and academic standards need to be addressed sensitively. It emphasises the need of working with achieving a sense of “fit” in different relations between partners. It thus requires great efforts to overcome the differences and maintain a cooperative relationship between both parties, which is considered crucial not only to the successful curriculum development results, but to the further development of collaboration as well.

5 Discussion of HEI-Employer Collaboration in Curriculum Development

The chapter highlights how the experience of this MBA programme relates to other similar collaborative initiatives in the literature review. In addition, it tries to use the findings so far to discuss conditions and opportunities for productive HEI/employer collaboration in curriculum development more generally.

5.1 Establishing the Collaboration: Drivers and Partners

Reeve and Gallacher (2005) concluded that employer-university partnership is problematic because there is limited evidence indicating that employers want to engage. One aspect highlighted by the present case as being critical to influencing the design of effective work-force development solutions is that of effectively diagnosing employer needs. In the first place this was dependent on whether the new qualification could fill the market gap and serve as a sector focused degree in alignment with the specific business needs and company's strategy for employee development. The planning of this MBA programme suggests that it is of significance to understanding the drivers, business context, and the scope of collaboration in the planning phase. In doing this, the MBA programme team at BI developed and implemented a process for assessing the status, strengths, weaknesses, and future directions and needs of the intended programme. The specific needs and employer problems were spotted through market analysis and extensive consultation through sector association with a number of strategic employers. The identified needs in the sector would help the school prioritise programmes and future educational demands about what kind of learning, what kind of field, and for what kinds of people. This case of this MBA programme also suggests that there is also a demand for HEI to consider how the distinctive strength of universities can be built on in developing these relationships and in what sector of the market it will be most fruitful to work. Competitive analysis of the institution would help play to their strengths and focus on what employers value most. The initial input and information informed a clear and

shared vision of cooperative working for the overall intent of collaboration and approach to the programme/curriculum development.

One of the good practices presented in the case study is the convening of a board of strategic employers, Advisory Board, as the established link to business. The unit facilitated outreach to the relevant employers who help design and deliver the learning solutions. The presence of an employer group such as Advisory Board may contribute to:

- helping to broker contracts and support the development of employer engagement and influence in a sustainable way;
- continuing to serve as a forum where businesses in shipping industry can get together to weigh in on the latest trends affecting their businesses, talk about where demand is, and how to drive it;
- collaborative planning and implementation of the curriculum.

Organising an in-person dialogue with employers through Advisory Board makes an important step when BI intends to bring people together to zero in on a critical need, address it, and move on to the next thing.

Working in collaboration requires individuals and organisations to direct considerable effort towards agreeing a shared agenda from which both parties are convinced that they will benefit, and to which both parties are committed to contribute, not just at the beginning, but over the lifetime of the relationship (Rowley, 2005, p.8). Early in the planning stage of the MBA programme, the aims, the scope and agendas of the collaborative efforts were discussed, articulated and shared by both parties, but the big issue of the lack of commitment still emerged in the curriculum development process later in the implementation of the curriculum. Thus, it is necessary for employers and HEIs managing the collaboration to understand the level of commitment required at the beginning of the collaboration. This includes understanding the amount of time and resources required, and over what period. Moreover, both parties taking part in have to do more than just make a commitment, they have to develop and implement an action plan and are monitored against (Cooper et. al. 2010, p.36). When the collaboration evolves to next level, the action plan needs to be revised in order to accommodate new changes, and the consequently changed roles of partners also need a new contract to clarify, i.e. employers extend their role from course “advisor” to course “developer” and have thus more direct impact on curriculum development. This also requires that the

collaboration be formulated through a formal Charter, Pledge or similar document and subscribed to by both parties.

The initial step of planning the MBA programme acted as a responsive process to identify and meet employer needs. However, this collaborative partnership in the higher education curriculum may potentially provided challenges to the departmental structure that underpinned its conventional curriculum. Moreover, getting the collaborative procedure formalised through a contractual agreement in terms of action plan and clarified responsibilities would inevitably present the threats to the academic powers or intruding into “the territory of academics” held by the faculty members. In this sense this HEI/employer collaboration is a really sensitive subject in the existing context of higher education, and may arouse institutional resistance to its formalisation or to the stronger influences of employers that a formalised relationship may bring about. This may act one of reasons for that the collaboration between BI and employers continued on an informal and small-scale basis for quite a time.

5.2 Designing and Delivering an Appropriate Qualification

This MBA curriculum development demonstrated a responsive and interactive process with the emphasis on employer involvement, collaboration, skills development and case-based learning: Ongoing relationship with employers through the advisory board and industry consultants certainly made curriculum more responsive to the new demands and changes; Managing the different expectations and understandings between academics and employers made the course planning and design a process of synergy of activities; and practical lessons of case method constructed a meaningful learning for participants/employees based on the evidence from the workplace appropriate to a reflective analysis of practice.

Employer engagement will only work well if learning outcomes/competencies satisfy their requirements and priorities. In a MBA programme such as this, with complexity of a board of employers, clarification over the learning outcomes that combine both academic and practical values was central to the curriculum’s success. Employer feedback can be a valuable source of input to curriculum development when it helps identify knowledge, skills, and

competencies that were especially helpful at a particular educational juncture such as this MBA programme.

BI also made employers part of this dynamic process in which relevance of the content was reinforced to allow better focus on the real-life situations and main contemporary issues. This employer involvement should not end in the planning phase. Liaison with the employer body and consultants from the industry ensured that the programme team was informed about developments in the sector and can contribute to debates about changes to qualifications. The course leaders needed to maintain continuous dialogue with industry consultants through the modules and courses, monitoring progress and responding to the issues that arise.

In many examples of collaborative work in curriculum development, cultural differences, reflecting in the different understandings of learning and knowledge which were held by partners, emerged as a concern (Reeve & Gallacher, 2005). A central theme which has emerged from the case study of MBA curriculum development is the importance of managing expectations based on these apparent differences between employers and the HE institution. This occurred at the level of planning and optimising the course design. Unlike the employer customised approach, where all courses being conducted on the company's own premises, the central dimension of the EMBA curriculum design was to create modules and course plans properly combining and balancing the academic and practical content instead. The course design involved a process of shaping a vibrant mix of workplace and disciplinary knowledge within the curriculum. This process depended on the quality of debate on how such an integration could be achieved and the experience and expertise of professors to decide what is the appropriate balance of theoretical and practical content.

The present case study also highlights that academics should lead the planning and development process. The leading roles of academics would avoid the potential danger that employees engaged in a much narrower learning experience and lose important opportunities for learning as a result of excluding all the academic materials or approaches which were not in tune with the pervasive culture of the company (Kinman & Kinman, 2000). This implies that HEI may need to take a robust stance in partnership discussions (Reeve & Gallacher, 2005, p.228).

In addition to course development, collaborative efforts extended further into course delivery. The analysis in this thesis suggests that understanding company-based problem, appropriate

support from a cooperative employer, the open and frequent communications, a well-designed plan, and a high performing team would contribute to the success of a cooperative project. On the other hand, employer involvement in teaching/learning leads to consider how employers should involve themselves in teaching, whether their teaching should put under the formal evaluation procedure, and how their input can be turned into practical sessions. The experience from this programme emphasises the role of academic course leaders in managing the input of practitioners, ensuring practitioners exemplifying a diverse range of areas were selected and that guest lectures fitted within the parameters of the curriculum.

The pedagogical approach used in this MBA programme regarding case method and project work would mean to, or has the potential to, link assessment with the world of work and involving employers and practitioners in the process. However, employers' support to facilitate participants/employees' approach to assessment was denied by the academic side for the fear of losing the academic rigour and quality. This gives rise to a question about how employers are expected to involve in the curriculum development process. The scope and extent of the employer engagement and influence varies in different contexts depending on the aims and nature of educational programme, i.e. initial higher education, work-based learning programmes, foundation degrees, and continuing professional development, etc. In a MBA programme with a professional nature such as this, the institution may choose to delegate responsibility for developing the course content and teaching practical sessions to partner employers, but the responsibility for setting any intended learning outcomes, the operational aspects of the programme and ensuring that the curriculum provides adequate opportunities for them to achieve learning goals, rests with the awarding institution. As an extension of this collaborative approach it may be appropriate to suppose further involving employers in the work-related assessments (i.e. practical cases and projects). However, this is not necessarily a straightforward process because at the same time this MBA programme also features an emphasis on academic values, broad perspective of learning, and strong academic controls. Previous research has shown that employer involvement in the assessment depends on a number of factors, including what might be termed the workplace culture in relation to assessment of performance, the resources of assessment through observation by workplace staff, and the availability of staff appropriately qualified to undertake such assessment (Edmond, et.al. 2007, p. 176-7). The desirability of doing so needs to be further investigated and it certainly will encounter difficulties provided that high level of employer commitment is required into such work. It shows that the capacity of employers to be

involved in the assessment in the work context is obviously constrained in the present case, since they need to have both the training and the time to undertake such assessment as part of their management role.

Employer involvement in work-related assessment would also mean that new assessment criteria from employer's point of view needs to be considered and integrated as a part of the assessment package. The performance of problem-base cases and project can be evaluated on "integrated" criteria that both meet the requirement of organisation for solutions to real work problems and students' need to meet the learning outcomes for specific modules. In the wider landscape of curriculum development today, we see tendencies to such integrations on a general level, for instance in the development of qualification frameworks that incorporates intellectual, academic and professional competencies. This needs to be concretised and negotiated at individual programme level, with work-based assignments together with corresponding criteria adapted with a view to developing better integration.

In terms of curriculum review and improvement, the programme team should carry out regular reviews of the programme progress and get employers in the review process through the board meetings or bringing employers into the classroom on an ongoing basis. Key performance data and other evidence such as student evaluation reports must feed into this process and is available for use by employers. To best target employer' input in curriculum improvement, it further urges that there should be a clearly defined role for them in contributing their advice and suggestions into the re-design process. Having employer feedback on curriculum improvement issues needs to result in a target driven quality improvement action plan, which would enlarge the support base for the curriculum change within the business and industrial communities and serve as a base for getting their support in implementing the curriculum improvement plan.

5.3 Sustaining the Collaboration

5.3.1 Maintain the Engagement of Collaborators

The crucial yet persistent issue is the lack of commitment in the collaborative process without both parties being enough engaged and committed. One of the important lessons informed by this experience is the need to be highly proactive in engaging employers and academics. In

the first place, there should be explicitly recognised mutual benefits perceived by both partners in order for the stimulation of commitment, which was identified as key to the development of successful collaboration by Hawkins & Winter (1997). There is a need for universities to reflect more carefully on the distinctive contribution which they can make (Reeve & Gallacher, 2005, p. 231) and give real values to both partners. Goetzel et al. (2002, p.326) discussed engagement issues and concluded that:

“To engage stakeholders effectively, the performance approach should be presented as a business issue rather than primarily as a technical issue. The dominant need is for clear communication of the meaning, application and benefits of the performance approach, with emphasis on actual benefits and value.”

It turned out to be important to persuade employers to participate with economic advantage and direct business benefits. A crucial benefit seems to be the value of this MBA qualification to the promotion of employee development and the compensation for the lack of senior roles in the industry. These business benefits can also be presented through developing and conducting a range of project work of high quality that has direct value to the companies. The present case also indicates that employers and academics become more engaging when they perceived indirect and personal benefits from the collaborative curriculum development as has been discussed in the previous chapter.

This experience from the programme also stresses the importance of building ongoing dialogue with employer during the lifespan of curriculum development and/or implementation, and discussing needs, rather than simply selling ‘product’: continuous contacts are required between course leaders and industry consultants over the content of the curriculum; the Advisory Board meetings should be arranged on a more regular basis, through which a stronger sense of involvement is expected to be created by joint development, extensive consultation, business promotion and evolution of projects; the board members should be invited to participate in special events and communicate with faculty and students regularly, etc. In order to maintain continued input from employers, the sustained executive support also needs to be provided for employers in order to strengthen continuous contacts with them and facilitate their participation. In the present case, timely feedback was provided in order for updating employers on progress of the programme and made sure information that covered a number of key matters relating to the programme available to employers, i.e. information on modules which were most relevant to practice, evaluation reports, what has been achieved at

current stage, next step agenda and initiatives, etc. The experience from the case further indicates that the feedback and follow-up activities with employers requires support by an effective communication process between HEI and employers, which needs to be more regular, systematic and formalised.

In the implementation of the collaboration in curriculum development, it could be hard to focus the minds of employers and senior academics on curriculum issues when they had many other pressing priorities. Acknowledgement of the heavy personal involvement in terms of time and effort expended by curriculum developers (including faculty members and practitioners) are essential requirements for the successful implementation of curriculum. The case study suggests that the levels of commitment, time or other resources required from both sides should be negotiated to ensure reasonable amount of time being invested in curriculum activities. This reinforces the importance of establishing clear objectives and roles through a formalised agreement in order to get both partners more attached and committed to the collaborative efforts.

5.3.2 Maintain Positive Dynamics between Collaborators

Molzhan and Purkis (2004) stressed successful curriculum development results when effective and cohesive collaborative relationships exist among faculty members, administrators, professional, bodies and other contributors, specifically in the present case, employers. In the present case study, another central dimension with regard to the maintenance of collaboration relates to “people fit”, that means, how to maintain an effective working relationship between academics and employers in the development initiative.

This curriculum innovation posed major challenges to the academic structures and powers that have been long held by the academics. This raised a critical question and concern regarding the extent to which faculty members can accept and blend in the influences by employers into the curriculum development process. The programme directors thus needed to be sensitive to the possible opposition from the academic side due to the perceived loss of absolute control in the process, and identify those aspects over which academics retain control. It may be of benefit to involve the partners so that their needs and responsibilities are considered. Another important implication relating to this is that academics need to take meaningful action on the basis of input received from employers. Collecting employer feedback but not acting on it can undermine the credibility of the development process.

Accordingly, it is very important making employers' contributions more visible and relevant, and being reflected continuously about compromise throughout the development process. Employers need to have feedback on what resulted in curriculum plan by means of their input and advice; they also need to follow up to see how they might be further involved. Trust is established between the employers and faculty members when employers felt that their input was valued. This is especially the case when employers influence course content and improvement issues, which would generate more active participation by employers into the development process and trust between collaborators.

Differences in interests, professional language, and professional culture must necessarily be bridged to share ideas and build joint understanding (Schneider & Pickett, 2006, p.259). A view of "equitable partnership" was therefore advocated as central to effective collaboration presented in the present case study, where both parties contribute their distinctive resources (Portwoor, 1996). It needs to be recognised that all the collaborators that this will be a learning situation: that means, both academics and employers can share resources and bring something complementary to each other, which might be termed as 'learning arena' by the programme director of the MBA programmes. In this sense, showing respect for others' knowledge and skills is essential to effective working relationship.

In sum, the analysis points to how engaging employers in curriculum development is not a one-time issue but rather a continuous effort. This collaboration should represent an "ongoing" relationship through which HEI comes to understand and respond flexibly to the needs of the organisation. However, the discussion in previous research and the present case study underscores that it is impossible to get commitment of all the people involved and there is no one right way to structure long-term continued employer engagement.

5.4 Developing the Collaboration to "Partnership"

As been discussed in the last chapter, institutional limitations, quality assurance agenda may weaken the influence of employers in the process of collaboration. It was by no means a smooth or certain process. To a significant extent the collaborative efforts in curriculum development have been driven by the need to satisfy the powerful internal stakeholders within the university and to demonstrate the university retains control of 'standards' (Reeve & Gallacher, 2005, p. 230). Under the condition the curriculum development through

collaboration with employers has to adjust to the requirements of quality assurance system. Most importantly, there is a crucial role for programme director/administrators to review the existing activity and seeking to improve it, in particular, to overcome the convergences within the institution and between the collaborators. As suggested in Paul (1996) and Karren (1997)'s study, the rate of change required for higher education to adapt to new realities will greatly depend on the motivation and involvement of both academia and industry. It is also necessary to take a stepwise approach as being adopted in the present case to deepen the relationship so that employers can have a more direct impact on curriculum development. It further suggests that stable relationship are needed at the current stage from which further activities can be developed together and moving to next level of collaborative work. Evolving collaboration to deeper integration with employers needs strong motivations and constant adjustments to changing circumstances. Indeed, overcoming cultural differences and language barriers to establish a shared strategic intent will require substantial time and effort on both sides (Nixon et al., 2006, p.50).

This chapter has gone through the distinct collaborative phases and reflected the key aspects of curriculum development through HEI/employer collaboration and how the collaboration has functioned. It has also illustrated how the case study presented in the thesis may imply and address the issues for the effective collaborative curriculum development. The main findings of this chapter will be summarised in the next chapter.

6 Conclusions, Limitations, and Suggestions for Further Research

6.1 Conclusions

In light of the research objective, this study provides some useful insights into the process used in a business school's MBA programme for integrating employer input into curriculum planning and delivery. These results allowed to identify issues and challenges emerging in the process, and also provided insight into the good practice that may contribute to effective employer engagement/collaboration.

The real challenge of establishing HEI/employer collaboration, and a niche market for the new degrees and qualification, lies in how HEIs perceive and respond to employers' needs and possibly convert their education externally fitted to the organisation. It is also argued in the present research that there should be a regular, consistent and formalised procedure concerning the collaborative efforts in curriculum development, featured by a clearly stated contractual agreement of the objectives, the roles and responsibilities, the courses of actions that each of the partner is committed to. Potentially, a formalised collaboration would provides major challenges and threats to the departmental structures that underpin its conventional curriculum, reduce the imbalance of the power between academics and employers, and thus potentially provoke institutional resistance to the change and other sensitive subjects as a result.

The collaboration regarding curriculum development between BI and employers contributed to circulating information on existing programmes of study, received advice from leading employers in the industry on the validity of curriculum and proposed improvements in the content, delivery, and review and improvement of the courses, in particular those delivered through 'industry courses' and case-based learning. A critical reflection of this MBA curriculum development is around issues about ensuring 'best fit' of employers' objectives of workforce development to the right learning experience design, that means, each planning phase of curriculum development is driven not only by the academic values, but also by the nature of work roles and gaps in knowledge and competencies. The ability to integrate employer input, develop external links, and combine academic rigor and knowledge with

practical learning and work-based projects, were recognised as important in enhancing professional development of the participants/employees. Tools to be promoted for achieving the learning aims included case-based modules, practical sessions, placement of business projects, and employer input in teaching/learning experience. It has been particularly shown in this case study that the employer involvement should not end with the initial consultancy, and the continuous employer input should be guaranteed and sustained to keep abreast of rapidly changing demands. Further, employer involvement in teaching and cooperation of project work with HEI led to the consideration of quality assurance issues, integrated assessment schemes and the needs for new standards.

The crucial issue is how to sustain an ongoing relationship between HEIs and employers and to get partners continuously engaged and committed. Sustaining engagement requires that HEI managing the collaboration reflects on the distinctive contribution they can make and creates real values to the partner employers; it also requires providing and improving support for employers through effective feedback and communication process; and it insists that the levels of commitment and roles of responsibilities be secured and bounded by a formal contractual agreement to accommodate changes. It shows that passive attitudes from academics towards curriculum innovation may act as a prohibitor to employer participation in curriculum development. One of the success factors to effective collaboration is identified as making positive dynamics and interactions between the partners. “Equitable relationship”, sharing resources, showing respect for each other’s expertise, etc. is key to this, but not at the expense of clear leadership and management of the curriculum. In addition, the analysis in the thesis points to how engaging employers in curriculum development is not a one-off event but rather a continuous effort, it also underscores that it is impossible to secure commitment of all the people involved, which can only be an overriding goal. There is no one right way to structure long-term continued employer engagement.

Despite the interest in the collaborative relationship between HEI and employers, it has appeared that the collaborative curriculum developments within HEIs are still limited and marginal. The further evolvement of the collaboration faces major challenges: not only powerful institutional agendas serve as an actor weakening the influence of employers, deep-rooted differences which exist between employers and academics may impinge on attempts to further evolution of the collaboration to a fully integrated partnership. It is therefore necessary to take a stepwise approach as being adopted in the present case to deepen the relationship. It

may be the truth that the collaboration has been on an informal and small-scale basis for quite a time before it evolves into a fully integrated and long-term partnership.

Based on the experience of this EMBA programme, my analysis is that the collaborative process of curriculum development is fraught with both difficulties and opportunities. The focus of tension is reflected between professional and educational aspirations and different stakeholders' interests. HEIs have a key role in support the “professionalism” process that is currently going on in the higher education, but this will require to defend HE's legitimate values of education and at the same time examination of vocational/professional relevance of curriculum to ensure that education has a currency in workplace. The findings of this research suggest that certain conditions are necessary to create satisfactory curriculum development initiative with employers, including the existence of a driver to imitative the process, leadership to oversee the process, a supportive developing climate, and effective working relationship, etc. Establishing good practice with regard to employer engagement is not just a question of course design but ultimately employer readiness and willingness to engage in supporting learning (Edmond et. al., 2007, p. 179). HEIs and faculty members need to develop better articulated pedagogical models for workforce development purposes, where the presence of employers should be guaranteed in “supporting learning opportunities” on ongoing basis. The scope and extent of employer engagement in curriculum development is managed differently across programmes, it seems that employers are willing to commit to the curriculum planning and design, but they may found difficult for further involvement in assessment. The present research has addressed the fundamental questions raised in Edmond et. al.'s research (2007, p. 179) such as: how should employers be expected to be involved and how can their engagement be guaranteed and how should the different interests of academics and employers be managed at the level of individual programme? However, there is no one right or perfect answer to the complexity of engagement issue and how this can be incentivised and strengthened. These questions may remain unsolved and would need a range of case studies for further references. More research is still needed to understand how meaningful employer input can be integrated at individual programmes; how employers can be involved in work-based assessment or other activities in supporting student learning; and how both partners can be effectively engaged.

6.2 Limitations of the Study

The findings of this study have some limitations and, therefore, caution must be exercised in generalising the results beyond this one institution.

One limitation of the study is the sample size of the informants and use of one higher education institution for the study. The main empirical evidence was based on the information from five individual interviews; and a larger size of informants would certainly increase the reliability of the results. Also, the research could not gain enough information for a thorough document analysis or through participation observation in board meetings due to language barrier. It is recommended that investigation should also look into the views from a larger cohort of participants and more information will provide the researcher with cross-validation of the data (Merriam, 1998). Moreover, this study was conducted at only one institution; the need for a body of case studies as a resource of reference could provide better representation and/or different insights and perspectives regarding curriculum development through collaboration. This could further increase the reliability as well as internal and external validity of the results.

The second limitation is that feedback from participants/students was not sought at the same time the views from faculty members, programme directors and employer were being investigated. Therefore, this research cannot reflect how this collaboration combined with employer input has had actually influenced teaching/learning from the perspective of participants, i.e. their skills development as a result and what they perceive as the good practice of employer engagement, etc. The views from students will make it possible to evaluate the overall effectiveness of the collaborative curriculum development. I believe that systematically collecting data with student survey or interviews along the interviews with curriculum developers could have provided additional perspective.

The final limitation of the study is that this case study only reported the experience of this curriculum initiative at its initial phase as programme directors are seeking ways to deepen the collaboration to the next level. If there were not limitation of timescale and resources, the study should have been extended to a longer period to investigate the effectiveness of the collaboration as it evolves to another phase until to a fully developed partnership.

6.3 Suggestions for Future Research

Employer engagement/collaboration can mean different things to different participants and in different contexts. The literature review by Scesa and Williams (2007, p. 27) has shown that there are distinctions between initial HE, work-based learning, and workforce and continuing professional development in terms of employer engagement. Research might therefore explore what is meant by ‘employer engagement’, ‘who’ does it involve in different context? (e.g. the individual employer, the sector, the professional organisation), and for what purposes? (e.g. teaching and learning, employability, workforce development, consultancies)? What input and roles do employers have? What works and why? These topics are also recommended by the present study for further research.

Most of the studies reported are one-off investigations of the initiatives, thus more studies might be undertaken to gauge the longer-term outcomes of this curriculum innovation on employers, students/employees and faculty members. Particularly, it is useful to investigate the evolution of the collaborative efforts with a view to understanding the process of the collaboration.

Research might also focus on the use of student focus groups to examine the impact of employer involvement on students learning outcomes, or the relationship between their learning outcome and employer engagement. However, research of this nature might pose difficult methodological issues, i.e. identifying a programme, identifying measures of impact, and isolating ‘single’ aspects of students’ learning experiences in relation to outcomes, (Scesa & Williams, 2007, p. 27). It is also recommended more research be done to investigate what students perceive as good practice of employer engagement.

There can be also a need to explore how employers could best contribute their resources or to provide opportunities to support curriculum development and managing student learning opportunities.

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Appendix I: Interview Guide

These questions seek an understanding into and how professors and industry representatives/consultants they worked collaboratively in curriculum development through the process of planning, establishing, implementation and development, and whether and how this collaboration has impacted on curriculum and contributed to improved design and delivery.

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Context

To identify why this Executive MBA has been established and what its strategic aims and perceived outcomes are.

- 1) How did you as an educational planner or curriculum developer identify the needs and markets? (Demand analysis of employer's problems and what this program might achieve and help resolve for the sector, e.g. regional needs, skills gaps and shortage, sector's current and future skills needs.)
- 2) How did you as a curriculum developer customise the education/learning to meet the needs of a specific group of learners or the industry based on the needs identified?
- 3) What are the essential features of the EMBA qualification different from the traditional HE program? (e.g. Does it place emphasis on employer involvement, collaboration, employment relevance, or skills development and progression, etc.)

2. Issues concerned with relationship building

- 1) How did you establish relationship with industries? (e.g. Stages to build contact? Redesign the organizational structure; regular committee meetings, etc.)
- 2) What has brought the BI and the workplace together to create this new learning opportunity?
- 3) In your opinion, what are employers' motivations of involving in this development initiative? (e.g. workforce development, a communication platform, etc.)

- 4) What are the mostly concerned issues during your collaboration with employers?
- 5) Is there a common goal shared by partners or the clear articulation of the aims of this collaboration? If yes, what are they?
- 6) How does Advisory Board operate? What is its main input in the curriculum development? How does the programme team use Advisory Board and committee meetings as a platform to communicate with employers?
- 7) How does HEI coordinate and manage employer links? (e.g. outreach staff)

3. Issues concerned with curriculum design and delivery: based on the training needs identified

To identify the key elements around which the curriculum has been designed and how academics have collaborated with employers during the process, specifically focusing on employer input into the curriculum development.

- 1) How is the development process managed? (Who undertake the main curriculum development work? What are the main roles of those involved, such as developer, tutors and employers?)
- 2) As a developer, how do you receive feedback from industry consultants to design the curriculum?
- 3) What resources do employers provide to undertake the curriculum development? In what aspects does the advice from employers have impact on curriculum?
 - How do you define qualifications (skills/competencies) in both academic and professional context?
 - How do you interpret employer input, evaluate the acceptable content, and apply it to designing curricula?
 - How has the curriculum been designed to reflect skills needs and requirements of industries? (e.g. pedagogies adopted, the consultancy project)

- How do you assess the learning outcomes in relation to the requirements of employers?
- 4) How have employers been involved in curriculum delivery? (teaching, project cooperation, etc.)
 - 5) Do employers contribute to the curriculum review and improvement? What revisions have been made reflecting their feedback or expectations?

4. Issues concerned with relationship maintaining

To identify what are the barriers to building and maintaining relationship and what may contribute to a better and effective relationship.

- 1) Please highlight some of the difficulties in working with other collaborators in the curriculum design and delivery (e.g. divergence of opinions, how to get the equal weight between partners, different interests between HE and industries, etc.).
- 2) As a programme director, what are your approaches to engaging both partners? How do they secure the commitment of all the partners to the development process?

5. Evaluation of the work done and the future prospective of the curriculum collaboration

- 1) To what extent have the objectives of the collaborative efforts in curriculum development been achieved so far?
- 2) What are the success factors/effective practices in terms of collaborating with employers in curriculum issues?
- 3) What are your future strategies for the collaborative work? How are you going to carry them out?
- 4) And what are the most challenging tasks for you in deepening the collaboration?